**A Young Girl's Weaponization of the Mythos**

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/43833240.

| | |
|---|---|
| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandoms: | 幼女戦記 \| Youjo Senki \| Saga of Tanya the Evil (Anime), 幼女戦記 \| Youjo Senki \| Saga of Tanya the Evil (Manga), 幼女戦記 \| Youjo Senki \| Saga of Tanya the Evil - Carlo Zen (Light Novels), Cthulhu Mythos - Fandom, Cthulhu Mythos - H. P. Lovecraft |
| Characters: | Tanya von Degurechaff, Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov, Hans von Zettour, Erich von Rerugen |
| Additional Tags: | Eldritch Horror Researcher Tanya, Accidental success, Crack, Crack Treated Seriously |
| Language: | English |
| Stats: | Published: 2022-12-25 Completed: 2025-01-12 Words: 325,902 Chapters: 45/45 |

# A Young Girl's Weaponization of the Mythos

by Zahariel_Scholar

Summary

Tanya thought that writing a paper on the potential applications of ancient magic would be her ticket to being assigned to boring, useless, SAFE research work far from the frontlines. But her crazy theory turned out to work well beyond her expectations, and now, as the head of Division Y, she has to manage the mad scientists and occultists under her command, the eldritch monsters they have created, and the demands of their superiors for more miracles to fight the Great War with.
Is this all Being X's plan ?!

Now has a TV Tropes page :
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/AYoungGirlsWeaponizationOfTheMythos

# Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Although much of our Fatherland's glorious legacy has been lost due to the ravages of the Inquisition in the 14th century, there remain traces of the magic developed by our ancestors if one knows where to look.*

*Using modern methods and technologies, I believe that this lost knowledge could be reconstituted, and entire branches of magecraft lost to us because of the barbarism and ignorance that once swept the entire continent restored.*

*In this paper, I will discuss not only the methods by which this might be accomplished, but the potential uses of such recovered spells, based on the fragments that have reached us across the ages. Finally, I will demonstrate the proposed methodology, using records from the Academy's library, accessed for this purpose thanks to the generous authorization of Major Lergen."*

Introduction of the dissertation 'On the Possible Applications of Elder Magic in Warfare', by Cadet Tanya Degurechaff, Imperial Military Academy, April 1923

---

*"... Also, regardless of her academic and martial prowess, one must not forget Degurechaff's extreme youth. Though it may be dishonorable to say so, I believe that sending such a young child to the battlefield would be a far worse stain on the Empire's honor. One must also consider the optics of such a deployment : should our enemies learn that we sent a nine-years old girl to the frontlines, God alone knows what their propaganda machine would be able to make out of it !"*

Letter from Major Lergen agreeing to Cadet Tanya Degurechaff's transfer to a research division rather than to the flying mage corps, answering to a query by a high-ranking Imperial noble regarding her dissertation's possible applications, June 1923.

---

*"With the war against the Legadonian Entente and the Francois Republic now in full swing, it is our belief that all resources of the Empire should be used in the most efficient manner possible.*

*To this end, following the latest reports of Division Y, it is our suggestion that Tanya Degurechaff be promoted to the rank of Major. We believe that this will give her the authority required to manage the rest of the personalities involved in Division Y's operations, since apparently this young girl both has a better head on her shoulders than the so-called academic elites of Berun, but also a better grip on the practical realities of management."*

Excerpt from a memo at the Staff Headquarters of the Imperial Army, September 1923 (approved).

*"November 10th, 1923.*

*Well, the last few months have certainly been interesting, no one can argue otherwise. I freely admit that I was sceptical when Major Degurechaff was put in charge of our research ... No, that's a lie. I was outraged that such a young girl – a child ! – had been given authority over me and my colleagues. Sure, her magical prowess was off the chart, and no one would have called her an idiot after reading that dissertation of hers, but a man has his pride !*

*I am not so prideful, however, as to not recognize when I am wrong. Major Degurechaff is a true genius, possessed of a vision that reaches far beyond what any of us thought possible. The Denkmaschine she suggested has been a tremendous success, and we are ready to begin testing of the first reconstructed rituals. All we're waiting for are the supplies we need, as well as the proper lunar phase and ... well, the test subjects.*

*The Major has assured me that she has contacted our military overseers about procuring suitable specimens. I confess I am ... less than enthusiastic about that particular aspect of our research, but I recognize its necessity, and I know better than to argue in front of her. Her eyes ... they don't look like those of a little girl at all. Hell, sometimes they hardly look human at all. But then, I guess she'd have to be cold in order to lead the kind of research we are undertaking here."*

Excerpt from the personal diary of one of the researchers at Division Y.

---

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : Major Tanya Degurechaff

Subject : Dacian deployment order

Date : September 25th, 1924

*Major,*

*Yesterday at approximately 8:00 AM, the Dacian Army crossed the border between the Empire and the Grand Duchy and launched an invasion of the Empire. Approximately 600,000 men have been deployed. Faced with such overwhelming numbers, the border garrison has retreated, leaving the Dacians an open path to the Empire's heartlands.*

*With the worsening situation on the western and northern fronts, it will take us a minimum of four weeks to mobilize the 17th army and send it there, during which time the Dacians will ravage the Imperial countryside. Before withdrawing, the border garrison noted that the Dacians seem to lack a supply train suitable to their needs, leading us to believe they intent to forage for food.*

*To prevent this defilement of the Empire's territories, you are officially ordered to mobilize any and all assets of Division Y required to slow the Dacian army and safeguard the region.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : Orders received

Date : September 25th, 1924

*Your orders are received and acknowledged. We have begun preparations for the deployment of Projekt K against the Dacian army.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : Deployment results

Date : September 30th, 1924

*Brigadier General,*

*It is my pleasure to report that the deployment of Projekt K succeeded beyond our expectations, with no less than six instances of the Projekt being manifested.*

*The Dacian casualties are estimated at over 50% of their initial forces, with the remainder having broken ranks and fled back to the Grand Duchy or scattered in the countryside. Though most of them abandoned their weapons in their flight, not all did, and they should all be considered dangerous until apprehended.*

*I respectfully advise that the orders of the 17th Army be changed to capturing these remnants before they can threaten the local Imperial population, before marching on Dacia itself to capitalize on the shock caused by the loss of their army. The instances of Projekt K have been successfully recovered, and we believe there shouldn't be any long-term consequences of their deployment on Imperial soil.*

*Nevertheless, I would strongly advise against deploying Projekt K on the frontlines of the other conflicts in which the Fatherland is presently engaged. We were lucky on this occasion, in that no Imperial military assets were in range, but the confusion of the Rhine front, for instance, would all but ensure that friendlies would be exposed to Projekt K. Having witnessed first-hand what our new weapon is capable of, I'm certain that the impact on morale would overshadow any military gain.*

*We at Division Y will of course continue our work on the other Projekte.*

*For the Fatherland,*

*Major Degurechaff*

---

*INVADING DACIAN ARMY BEATEN BACK BY IMPERIAL WUNDERWAFFE !*

*After several days of fear across the nation following the announcement that the Duchy of Dacia had joined the cowardly Republic and Entente in their unjust and unprovoked war against our Empire, the spokespersons of the Ministry of War have announced that the Dacian incursion was successfully repelled.*

*While details are both scarce and classified, civilian experts had already made their worries about the Dacian invasion clear, as our noble Imperial soldiers were already occupied defending the Fatherland on two distant fronts, only their courage and the power of our extended rail network allowing them to hold the line. While none doubted that the Dacians would eventually be brought to heel by our superior might, there was no telling what ravages they might inflict on the Fatherland before being defeated.*

*However, thanks to the deployment of a top-secret weapon program, the entire Dacian army, estimated to count over half a million men, was put to flight without hours of breaching the Empire's sacrosanct borders ! Their command structure is believed to have been completely wiped out within moments of the first engagement with the mysterious Wunderwaffe, leading to the collapse of their formations and immediate flight from Imperial territory.*

*Already, thousands of fleeing Dacian troops have been captured by Imperial soldiers moving in the wake of the Wunderwaffe to secure the area. Meanwhile, our diplomats have sent messages to the Duchy of Dacia informing them of this total defeat and suggesting terms for the Duchy's surrender.*

*Truly, this is a glorious day for the Fatherland. With such mighty Wunderwaffen at our disposal, our victory in the Great War is only a matter of time !*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, October 2nd, 1924

---

*"The goats ... THE GOATS ! I can still hear them ! That hateful sound ... They trampled us, they crushed us, they tore us apart !*

*Our guns did nothing ! NOTHING ! Specks of metal against mountains of black, writhing flesh ... And the screams, the screams ! Half a million men, but we were ANTS ! Ants to be trampled by giants, nothing more !*

*All is lost, do you hear me ?! ALL IS LOST ! We have challenged the Devil, and he has sent his minions to destroy us all !"*

Excerpt from the testimony of one of the Dacian survivors of the attempted invasion of the Empire by the Grand Duchy, October 4th, 1924

---

*"To be blunt, we do not know what happened to the Dacian army.*

*Our previous intelligence efforts had told us that the Dacians didn't stand a chance against the Empire on their own, due to the lack of mechanization of their army. It was estimated that, while their invasion would eventually be stopped, the drain on manpower this would inflict on the Empire would be sufficient to turn the tide on the other fronts, or at least give the enemies of the Empire breathing space.*

*Instead, the Dacian army was annihilated within days of entering the Empire – and, as far as we can tell, it was effectively destroyed within a single engagement. While the Dacian forces were spread over a large area due to their numbers, they were still in close proximity, partially due to their lack of modern, long-range communication.*

*Most of the corpses are unrecognizable, and the survivors we have interrogated are delirious, often to the point of violence if pressed on what happened to them. I would suspect chemical weapons have addled their minds, except that the damage inflicted on the bodies of the dead doesn't look like anything that could have happened during panic.*

*The wildlife of the area seems to have been affected by whatever it is the Imperials did here. We observed animals of abnormal size and aggression, and even had to defend ourselves from attack on several occasions.*

*I recommend the Allied Kingdom mobilize any required resources in order to investigate this new weapon the Imperials have deployed against Dacia."*

Excerpt from the report of Agent 404, Albion Secret Service, October 6th, 1924

---

*October 10th, 1924 – Castle Schwartzstein – Division Y Headquarters*

How did it all come to this ?!

I could, of course, point straight at where it had started : with me writing that damnable dissertation one year ago. But I had written that paper while suffering from sleep deprivation due to pushing myself in order to get the good grades and recommendations that would get me a nice, safe posting at the rear. Even after my post-exam collapse and recovery, I had been confident that no one could possibly take it seriously.

I mean, mysterious ancient magics which could be used to crush a truly modern army ? Only a complete moron would have thought that could happen in real life ! Sure, the mage orb had revolutionized how magic was employed in warfare, but there was a world of difference between that and somehow creating superweapons from the scraps of knowledge that had survived the Inquisition's purges centuries ago.

Still, when my assignment to Division Y had come, I had been ecstatic. Sure, it wasn't the safe, rear posting at the Staff Headquarters I had been hoping for, but spending my career doing what I was certain would amount to little more than archaeological and anthropological research was a lot better than actually being shot at. In fact, it was even safer, since it was always possible for the general staff to end up being put on trial if we lost the war, while

people working in research programs were more likely to be discreetly hired by the victors. Even once the methodology I had proposed in my paper was shown not to work, if I could make myself sufficiently useful to the rest of the team, then I would be safe. Division Y's stated purpose pretty much required it to have at least one magically-gifted individual on board, if only to test whatever spells the rest of the team put together.

Except that it had worked.

The methodology I had proposed had worked. With the team of crackpot academics and half-mad magical researchers that had been thrown together to form Division Y, we had actually been able to build a giant magical computer from linked orbs that had then reconstructed long-lost spells from scratch using pattern recognition algorithms taken from a dissected search spell.

Or at least that's what we had told the brass. In truth, I wasn't certain that we weren't actually creating entirely new spells, like someone with a basic and faulty understanding of Latin trying to translate Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars and somehow ending up with an award-worthy cooking recipe.

Of course, that wasn't the worst of it. Even the fact that the spells we had 're-discovered' did in fact have military applications wasn't that bad. No, the problem was that all of them were something straight out of the works of HP Lovecraft, the (in)famous author from my original world. Which, beyond the mind-shattering cosmic implications, had much more immediate consequences.

The moment I had realized what we were working on, I had trebled security protocols and restricted access to the Denkmaschine, as those lunatics under my nominal command had called the primitive computer we had assembled. I didn't know what a computer keeping Mythos rituals in its memory banks could do if left in the hands of mad scientists, but I knew it wouldn't be anything good.

Later, I had expected my requests for human test subjects to be rejected out of hand – I had even prepared for the possibility that I'd be blamed for such blatantly inhumane requests and taken steps to cover myself accordingly. I had been brutally clear as to the possibility of failure in my letters, and had phrased even the best possible outcomes in coldly rational terms. I had been sure that it would be rejected out of hand, which would 'force' me to abandon these avenues of research and try to set Division Y on a less potentially-apocalyptic course.

Instead, we'd gotten the first batch of death row prisoners within two weeks. Even later, when I had asked for the bodies of dead Imperial soldiers, my request had been granted with a speed that had genuinely impressed the part of me that had worked in bureaucracy for so long.

I was almost certain Being X was involved in this whole mess. Nothing else could explain how well my crackpot theory had worked. I had to give the bastard points for perseverance : I'd thought myself safe from his influence once I had managed to get a posting away from the frontlines, but he'd still found a way to mess with me. And I had to admit, as ways to make

someone desperate enough to pray any god willing to listen for help, introducing them to the horrors of the Cthulhu Mythos certainly was an effective one.

It wouldn't work on me, though. Yet even so, I could admit to myself that recent events had shaken me.

Projekt K, [Kinder], had been horrifying to watch in action. It had taken every bit of my experience from my former life at keeping a poker face no matter what to avoid starting screaming in horror as the Children of the Horned Goat we had summoned had torn the Dacian army to pieces. And even then, by the time I had managed to regain enough composure that I could trust myself to do anything but maintain my flying spell and get to work on banishing the six eldritch horrors we had brought into being, the ground had been littered with corpses. And sure, they had been enemy soldiers who had been invading my country unprovoked, but no one deserved to die like that. More to the point, there might not be any international treaties forbidding what we'd done, but it was still guaranteed to be prosecuted as a war crime if the war ended in anything less than total Imperial victory.

Upon our return to Castle Schwartzstein, I had immediately locked away the Flute of the Dark Mother that we had created and which I had used to perform the deployment of Projekt K. That damnable artefact now rested in one of the most secure vaults in the worlds, the combination of which was known only to myself. I was hoping that my after-action report would be enough to convince the brass that deploying that particular Projekt again would be a terrible mistake.

Of course, I knew they wouldn't be moved by something as irrational as the sheer horror of using eldritch abominations to wage war, so I had couched my arguments in pragmatic, costs-and-benefits terms. I was confident I had made my case well, but unfortunately, this wouldn't keep the brass' expectations of us from rising to impossible levels. The reward for a job well done was more work, after all, and the reward for performing a miracle was being asked to produce more miracles.

And the problem was, we did have the means to produce more miracles. Projekt K was just one of the avenues of research we had pursued that had ended up fruitful. As the overseer of Division Y and someone with military training, thinking of military applications for the works of my subordinates had fallen mostly on me, even if the researchers were all very enthusiastic – too enthusiastic – about suggesting potential uses.

So yes, Division Y could produce more miracles, perhaps even enough of those to win the war against the Entente and the Republic – hell, given some of the Projekte, perhaps even against the entire world. I only worried about what the end cost of it all would end up being.

The sound of a knock on my office door pulled me out of my pessimistic, self-pitying funk, and I snapped to attention.

"Enter," I called out, and the door swung open, revealing the figure of my personal assistant.

I had no issue admitting Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov was a beautiful young woman. A bit too young for my former self's taste, given that she was barely of legal age, but there was no denying that her aristocratic heritage had blessed her with good looks rather than the

deformities I'd associated with the inbreeding practiced by the so-called blue blood back in my old world. I suspected that in this world, the fact magical potential was at least partially hereditary might have played a part in the powerful making sure they didn't accidentally cripple their bloodlines by marrying their own cousins one too many times.

Of course, in the case of Viktoriya (or, as she insisted I call her, Visha), the point was moot. The women who had benefited from Projekt U would never have children, that much we were certain of. Things were a bit less certain for the men who had undergone the same procedure, but I wasn't about to authorize that kind of experiment. Sure, suggesting it might be the push too far that would get the whole Division shut down, but with my tracking record so far, it would probably just get approved, and that could give people all manner of inappropriate, stupid and dangerous ideas where a young female mage like myself was concerned.

"Here's your coffee, Major," she said, putting a cup of fragrant goodness in front of me.

"Thank you, Visha." I sighed in pleasure as I picked it up and breathed its aroma in.

It had been a pleasant surprise to find out that the loss of Visha's own ability to ingest normal food and drinks hadn't hurt her brewing skills at all. No one in the entire division made coffee as good as her, which was one of the reason I'd claimed her as my assistant after she had recovered from her … traumatic experience.

Visha was one of the greatest successes of Projekt U, [Untoten]. A conscript mage from the exiled Russy nobility that had fled the communist revolution by taking refuge in the Empire, she had been deployed to the Rhine front and met the fate of so many rookies sent to that hellscape. Unlike most of them, however, her body had been recovered and sent to our division. She had risen as one of the Deathless, which was really a fancy way of saying we had turned her into a vampire, though at least she only needed a few drops of magic-charged blood every week to sustain her. Vampire legends existed in this world, and though the name of Dracula's author was different here the title of the book was the same, which made sense since as far as I could tell, languages were the same as in my world, and Dracula meant, if I remembered correctly, Son of the Dragon in Romanian.

There were just over a score of Projekt U's results in the Division, mainly because each of them required a steady diet of mage blood, and we didn't have a lot of those. We didn't know what would happen to them if they starved : it wasn't exactly something we could test, not when our subjects were Imperial citizens who also happened to be capable of orbless, undetectable flight and strong enough to rip a steel door off its hinges. Morality aside, pissing them off would be just plain stupid. Even their deadly vulnerability to sunlight could be managed with the proper uniforms, though the slightest tear in their full-body cover would be fatal.

Of course, even if we had access to more mages, we couldn't resurrect every fallen Imperial soldier this way. Unique nutritional requirements aside, each instance of Projekt U was prohibitively expensive in terms of ritual reagents, and required the body to be more or less in one piece, which was a rarity in this war given the liberal use of artillery in the trenches. We had limited ourselves to mages, and I had even claimed that the ability to use magic was needed for the resurrection to work in the first place : the last thing we needed was for some

Imperial noble to think we'd stumbled onto a path to immortality and force us to turn the entire ruling class of the Empire into literal undead bloodsuckers. In my humble opinion, our image on the international scene already had enough problems.

Besides, for all I knew, the limitation actually existed. We hadn't tested it after getting our first positive results using mage corpses – that was how expensive the reagents were.

So far, Visha and her peers had taken the transition to vampirism remarkably well, but I'd no idea how long that would last, or how much of it was due to military discipline helping them keep calm as opposed to some mind-altering aspect of their transformation.

"Also," said Visha, "there's been another message from the headquarters." She put a sheet of paper on my desk, and I had to keep myself from groaning.

Then I read the subject line, and my efforts failed miserably. There, next to the identification code that indicated this order came from the highest level of military authority in the Empire, were the words :

*'Request for support on the Northern Front'*

Sure, I thought, phrase it as a 'request' if you want. As if I could possibly refuse. The bastards hadn't even waited a month.

I read the rest of the message : it was a summary of the situation in the North, which was far from ideal. The initial offensive on the Entente following the Norden Incident had been going well, but the morons at Central Headquarters had decided to risk sending all the reserves in the hope of quickly ending the war. Then the Francois Republic had joined in without provocation, forcing the Western Army to stand against them without support for months while the idiots in charge desperately redeployed the very forces they had sent north. That whole mess was why I had been ordered to intervene when Dacia had decided to throw its hat into the ring, despite its army being ridiculously behind the times.

Now, with the Imperial forces split between two fronts and with the Entente being not-so-secretly supported by foreign powers (including the Allied Kingdom, though we couldn't say that out loud lest they openly join the war) combined with the difficulties inherent in attacking an enemy on their home ground, the Northern Front had slowed down to a crawl and turned into trench warfare. Thousands had already died, and I knew from my memories of the first World War in my previous world that it would only get worse – a lot worse.

And so, since Division Y had proven to be so effective against Dacia, the genius at Headquarters had decided that throwing us into that grinder could only be a good idea.

I sighed. The worst thing was, we did have some things in our arsenal of horrors that I thought could be used to break the deadlock. So I couldn't simply refuse by pointing out the obvious differences between the situation in the North and the Dacian incursion, as my superiors were aware of the diversity of our work, even if they didn't know the specifics.

"Visha, please sit down. I'll need you to carry an answer to the transmission room once I'm done writing it."

"Of course, Major." She saluted sharply.

"Once that's done, please come back here. I'm afraid the next few days are going to be quite busy."

---

*"She accepted ?"*

*"Yes, sir. We received her response just now. She says she'll leave for Northern headquarters in three days, along with a small group of Division Y members, and link up with the theatre command there to discuss their options to, and I quote, 'break this unseemly deadlock for the glory of the Fatherland'."*

*"Good. After what happened to the Dacians, I had worried she might ... well, nevermind that. It was unworthy of me anyway. I should've known the Major would put her duty above all other concerns, and that her loyalty to the Fatherland is second to none. Did she give any details about what she's planning for our northern 'friends' ?"*

*"Yes, sir. She mentioned bringing several instances of Projekt U with her, along with some of the more ... practically-minded researchers of Division Y to assist her."*

*"Very well. Please contact Northern Headquarters and inform them of the Major's arrival. Remind them that she operates under our own authority, and that even if her activities and those of Division Y are classified, they are still to treat her as the heroine of the Empire that she is."*

*"Of course, sir."*

*"... You've something you want to say. What is it ?"*

*"Sir Brigadier General ... you've read her report on the deployment of Projekt K, and the interviews of the Dacian captives themselves. Are you sure sending her north is a good idea ?"*

*"I assure you that I don't intend for her to do the same thing she did there. I think she'd refuse if we tried to order her to do it anyway. But the longer this war goes on, the more people on both sides die. The Entente may have started this war, but it is our responsibility as military commanders to end it as fast as we can ... no matter the means required to achieve this. What happened to the Dacians was terrible, yes, but not only were they invaders in our country, the utter annihilation of their forces led to the Duchy's prompt surrender out of sheer shock and fear. Many of their soldiers died, yes, but their homeland – and ours – were spared from the ravages of war thanks to it."*

*"And you think Division Y can repeat that with the Entente ?"*

*"I don t know. But if there is anyone that can, it's certainly them, with Major Degurechaff leading them."*

Overheard exchange at the Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army, Berun – October 11th, 1924

Chapter End Notes

AN : Merry Christmas, everyone ! Here, have some comedy/eldritch horror.

This story was inspired by the TTRPG series Achtung ! Cthulhu which is basically "WW2 but with eldritch horrors". Except, you know, the Empire of Youko Senji isn't based on WW2 but WW1 Germany, which makes them having eldritch horrors under their quote-unquote control less horrifying. I actually had this chapter finished for some time, but I wasn't sure I wanted to publish it while I already had other stories in the works ... as you can guess, I caved in eventually.

Unlike Hell Is Empty, this is going to be a short series rather than a one-shot. I have a total of six chapters planned for this story. All of them should be in the same style as this one : a mix of in-universe document extracts and POV of important characters. This story's priority on my writing schedule will depend on its reception, but I will finish it regardless. I am planning to experiment with shorter fics that would let me explore a variety of fandoms and types of stories in the future. There are already several half-finished drafts and first chapters in my backlog, and if you have suggestions, don't hesitate to send them to me.

I am looking forward to your reactions on this story (don't take it too seriously, because I certainly didn't). On another note, the next chapter of A Blade Recast is almost finished, and I am pushing through to finish Prince of the Eye before the end of the year. After that, well, we'll see where the Muse takes me.

That's all from me today. See you all soon !

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Lieutenant General Schreise : "Can't you deploy the Wunderwaffe that destroyed the Dacian army on the frontline and finish this immediately ?"*

*Major Degurechaff : "Absolutely not. We were very lucky that weapon worked as well as it did when we deployed it there, and even luckier there weren't Imperial soldiers nearby. This weapon isn't a precise one, and I won't risk it hurting loyal Imperial forces by using it in the trenches."*

*Colonel General Wragell : "Why not ?"*

*Major Degurechaff : "I am afraid that is classified. You'll have to trust that I know what I'm talking about, and that deploying the weapon on this front would do far more harm than good to the Empire. But do not despair, gentlemen. Fortunately, Division Y has more than one string to its bow. Projekt K might be useless here, but I believe we can help you achieve our objectives with a different approach."*

*Lieutenant General Schreise : "We've only heard rumors about you and your Division's work. Just how many of these Projekte are there, Major ?"*

*Major Degurechaff : "I am afraid that is classified as well, Lieutenant General."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "And for good reason. As recent times have made clear, the Empire is surrounded by enemies, and keeping our trump cards secret is of paramount importance. Now, I have spoken with the Major about the capabilities of some of these Wunderwaffen that have yet to be revealed to the world, and we have come up with the rough outlines of a plan – one that will involve all of our forces working together to turn the tides of this war. However, we'll rely on you all to help iron out the details."*

*Major Degurechaff : "The first step of that plan will be the elimination of the Entente forces present in the region of Norden. To assist in that goal, I've brought with me reinforcements for the mage corps."*

*Lieutenant General Schreise : "What kind of reinforcements ? You brought less than fifty people with you in total. Even if they're all veterans ..."*

*Major Degurechaff : "I assure you, they'll be more than adequate to our needs."*

Excerpt from the minutes taken by Adjutant Hektor Braum of the meeting of Northern Imperial Headquarters, October 20th, 1924.

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : The Northern Front

Date : November 16th, 1924

*Brigadier General,*

*Now that the region of Norden is once more firmly under Imperial control, we are ready to move on with the next phase of the plan Brigadier General Rudersdorf designed with the help of the Northern Army's staff and my own humble assistance.*

*While Projekt U will be involved in this plan as it has been in the reclamation of Norden, it won't be enough by itself. I therefore formally request permission to deploy Projekt N in coordination with the instances of Projekt U as well as the Imperial forces already present on the front under the command of Brigadier General Rudersdorf.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : Major Tanya Degurechaff

Subject : Northern Front Authorization

Date : November 17th, 1924

*Major,*

*Congratulations for your exemplary work in Norden thus far. Give my regards to Rudersdorf.*

*Permission granted. You may proceed as you see fit.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*"Located on the southern coast of the Legadonian Entente, the city of Os serves as a logistical hub for the entire country. Its railway network connects to all corners of the Entente, allowing for swift transportation of supplies and troops.*

*This city, vital to the Entente's war effort, is protected by the Osfjord : a collection of coastal forts taking advantage of the local geography and equipped with anti-air batteries as well as artillery and torpedo bunkers. At least one mage company is stationed there at all time, and the facilities are suited for several hundreds soldiers.*

*Furthermore, the waters around the Osfjord are protected by aquatic mines, and a squadron of the Entente's Navy patrols them at all time. There are also barracks on the outskirts of Os itself, which the Entente uses to house its troops on their way to the front and back.*

*At the present time, an assault on the Osfjord is considered impractical."*

Excerpt from the Imperial report on the status of the Legadonian Entente's defenses in the Osfjord, last updated on September 19th, 1924.

---

*November 29th, 1924 – The Osfjord*

During the first days of the war, when the previous Legadonian government had launched an invasion of the contested region of Norden, Anson had been on the frontline as the leader of a flying mage squad. Though the invasion had immediately turned into an ungodly mess due to the utter lack of preparations of the Entente (which was the reason why it was now referred to as the *previous* government), Anson had distinguished himself well, managing to keep his men alive even as he provided cover for the withdrawal by destroying an Imperial artillery battery.

That had earned him a medal, a promotion to his current rank of Colonel, and the dubious honor of being sent right back to the frontline, where he'd fought until his unit had been recalled to help garrison the Osfjord while integrating the replacements for the men he'd lost to Imperial iron. They had been here for a month now, and Anson would have expected reassignment to the front line any day now – except, the situation had evolved at a breakneck speed.

In these last few months, the higher-ups had done their best to prevent panic, but rumors about what had happened to the Dacian Army still circulated among the troops. No one really believed the stories that tens of thousands of men had died in mere moments, of course, and the claims of Imperial super-weapons were similarly scoffed at. The prevailing theory was that the Dacians had been idiots, and had gone in without air cover, which had let the Empire crush them with a small force of elite aerial mages by killing their commanders and leaving the rest of them easy prey for magical aerial bombardment.

Personally, Anson had thought that theory made sense, but he couldn't help but think there was more to it than that. If the Dacian Army had indeed been defeated like this, why had the Empire claimed that it was the work of their so-called Wunderwaffen instead of honoring the heroic mages who had pushed back the invaders ? His second-in-command had told him that they were hoping to intimidate the other nations, and that the threat of super-weapons were more effective than that of powerful aerial mages for that. But Anson wasn't convinced. He had heard things at headquarters : the command staff had seemed a bit too worried, even considering they were fighting a war they had no hope of winning and shouldn't have been fighting in the first place.

And then, just after his unit's withdrawal from the front, the Empire had begun to utterly trounce the Entente forces. Entire outposts had been wiped out in the middle of the night, with only a few terrified screams on the radio before comms fell ominously silent. Supply depots had been destroyed and key personnel had been killed, and whole mage companies had disappeared, all without a single enemy mana signature being detected by the top-of-the-line magical radars Legadonia's allies had provided. The situation of the Entente army, already precarious, had become outright disastrous.

In a handful of weeks, the contested region of Norden had been completely under the Empire's control, and the Imperials had pushed on onto Legadonia itself. The Entente had scrambled to salvage a cohesive defense from its reserves and the few units who had made it out of Norden alive, but everyone knew it was going to be tough just to hold on until winter conditions forced the Empire to halt its advance. And even that would only be delaying the seemingly inevitable defeat to spring.

Between this and the still circulating rumors about Dacia, tensions had been high. One of the new recruits had even half-joked that the Empire must have made a deal with the Devil in order to recapture the ground the Entente and the 'volunteer groups' sent by its foreign allies had fought so bitterly to hold onto. Anson had laughed at the suggestion, of course.

But now, the Colonel was seriously reconsidering his position on the matter of infernal pacts being the source of the Empire's sudden victories. Not an hour ago, the night had been clear, with the stars and moon providing enough illumination for an aerial mage to recognize the landmarks beneath him. But now, a bank of thick fog covered the entire coastal stronghold, having come out of nowhere and reducing visibility to arm's length. If not for the mana signatures the rest of his unit were giving off, he would have thought he was utterly alone.

This was no natural weather phenomenon : he could sense the magical energy in it. It even messed with radio communication, making anything other than short-range useless. He and his men had taken off as soon as the mist had cut off communication, but the fog even messed with their compasses, resulting in them being hopelessly lost, unable even to return to their base. His command had been split into two groups, but they hadn't been able to contact the rest of their unit within moments of entering the fog, and Anson had been reduced to shouting orders for his comrades to stay dangerously close to him, just so that they could still detect one another's mana presence and communicate.

They went up, gaining altitude until they finally broke through the fog. They were high up, but not so high that they couldn't stay there with their equipment's assistance. Underneath them, the fog spread like a roiling sea, completely blanketing the land and sea. They tried to contact the rest of the Entente forces again, but all channels were still blocked.

Several moments later, the fog began to dissipate, again far too quickly for it to be natural. The sight revealed to Anson and his men left them slaw-jacked and horrified. The Osfjord coastal batteries, which were the key to the city's defenses, were burning, and thick pillars of black smoke rose from the detonated magazines of the destroyed guns. Tiny silhouettes moved against the flames, trying to escape the roaring infernos.

"What the hell ?" muttered one of Anson's men, shocked.

They watched in horror, Anson knowing that he was witnessing the fall of his beloved country. His mind was reeling, knowing that he had to order a retreat, but unable to tear his eyes from the sight. Then something at the corner of his vision drew his attention, and he turned – only to see yet another impossible sight. There, amidst the smoke-filled night sky, a figure was floating, holding position around two hundred meters from them as it faced them.

The figure was completely clad in a thick black leather cloak, with not an inch of skin exposed. The slight bulge on the chest was the only sign that it was a woman : her face was

covered by a gas mask with tinted lenses that didn't let anything show through. She wore metal gloves that were still dripping with blood, making it clear that she'd been in brutal combat mere moments ago. A standard issue Imperial mage rifle with affixed bayonet hung on her back – she hadn't even drawn her weapon. Her arms were crossed on her chest as she stared at Anson and his men, utterly unworried.

Then Anson saw another cloaked figure, and another, and another. They were completely surrounded, and his company of twelve was outnumbered two to one. The only reason they were still alive was that the Imperials hadn't used the advantage of surprise to slaughter them before they could react.

How the hell had they gotten so close ?! He hadn't felt any mana signature approach them …

Anson felt his heart sink in his chest as the realization hit him. The Empire had developed traceless mage flight. This was how they had captured Norden so quickly, and how, combined with the mist, they had destroyed the Osfjord's fortifications. Aerial mages relied on their ability to detect each other's power, even if it was greatly inferior to that of specialized devices, to keep track of both their allies and their opponents : given the speed and distances involved, mere human sight couldn't be relied upon.

Without that, all that was left was the standard radars, and those were calibrated for planes, not human-sized flying objects. Anson had spent his entire adult life in the military as an aerial mage, and he'd never even heard of the *possibility* of such stealth flying. It wasn't as flashy as whatever had left the Dacian army in tatters, but even a moment's consideration was enough for Anson to realize how much this deceptively simple innovation would change … no, *had already changed* the course of the war.

"Colonel, what do we do ?!" called out one of his subordinates, panicked, as they too noticed their situation.

"Don't open fire," he ordered reluctantly. "Let's see what they want."

"Colonel ! Mana signature approaching !"

For a moment, Anson thought another Entente mage had survived, but the sight of the approaching mage soon put that delusion to rest. This one wore the more familiar uniform of the Imperial aerial mages, but much smaller than Anson had ever encountered. To his shock, he saw that this was a child, younger than his own daughter. What was the Empire doing, sending girls like this to the frontline ?!

Wait, she was flying under her own power, and in the middle of a military operation. She must be a rare magical talent, though Anson still found it difficult to believe even the Empire would go that far.

She had a gas mask hanging from her neck, which, like the rest of her uniform, had to have been specifically manufactured for her size – or so Anson hoped, because he really didn't want to think of the implications of the Empire having storehouses of child-sized military equipment. On her uniform was the insignia of a Major, adding to the surreal nature of the scene.

"Good evening, mages of the Legadonian Entente," she declared after stopping ten meters or so from Anson and his men. She gestured to the sea behind them. "Please take a look over there. Do you see the lights approaching us ?"

They did, and Anson knew what that signified. The lights were those of Imperial ships approaching the fjord. The Imperial North Fleet was advancing onto Os, and the panicked, disorganized troops left to block their way had no hope of success.

"If you do not surrender, Colonel, then you will die for nothing," she told him bluntly. "And so will the men under your command. This battle is lost, and with it, the Entente's part in this war it started will soon be over. Within weeks at the very latest, Imperial troops will march through your capital."

She was not boasting or gloating, Anson knew even as part of him wanted to deny her words. She was simply stating the facts as clearly as she could.

"If you can kill us that easily, then why offer us the chance to surrender at all ?" he asked hoarsely. "There is no one to watch us but God, and we all saw what you did. Isn't keeping your Army's capabilities secret more important than the lives of enemy soldiers ?"

She smiled, and despite everything, it was still the scariest thing Anson had seen tonight.

"First, Colonel, you do not know our full capabilities. There is no one in the entire world who does. Secondly, and more importantly, I do not enjoy killing people. This entire war is a terrible waste of human potential, one started by your country because it needed a scapegoat to take the public's attention off your government's internal failings. Hundreds of your compatriots have already died tonight, and I expect more will perish before sunrise. But if you surrender, I can promise that not only will you and yours be treated well, I'll reach out to the troops below us to make the same offer. In victory, one must be gracious, after all, lest one be broken when the tide turns again."

So this was the famed Imperial logic and pragmatism in action … ?

Anson thought of the young men under his command, of the promise he'd made to lead them to the best of his abilities. He thought of the oaths he'd sworn to his country, of the sacred duty of all men to fight for their fatherland.

He thought of the women and children he had seen on the mustering fields, holding back tears as they waved farewell to their husbands and fathers headed for the grinder of war. He thought of their desperate prayers for someone, anyone, to end this horrible war that had been started by men who had known it wouldn't be them paying the price for it.

He thought of his wife and daughter, waiting for him at home, and he made his choice.

"Men," he called out to his troops, "we have lost. Don't throw away your lives pointlessly, I beg you. Our country, our families, will need us in the days to come."

Mercifully, none of them protested. They were as spooked as he was by this whole situation. He looked back at the small child, who looked back at him with eyes entirely too old to

belong in her youthful face. He turned his rifle in his hands and presented it to her handle first.

"I, Colonel Anson Sue of the Legadonian Army, formally surrender myself and my men under your care, Major," he said, forcing his voice to stay firm despite the shame of the words.

"And I, Major Tanya Degurechaff of the Imperial Army, recognizes and accepts your surrender," she replied, flying over to him and taking the rifle, which looked comically oversized in her hands. "Thank you for being reasonable, Colonel. I really didn't want to have to kill you."

Strangely, Anson believed her.

---

*December 6th, 1924 – Occupied city of Os*

As I drank a cup of Visha's coffee (where she had found the beans to make her usual brew I had no idea, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth) in our temporary housing on the city's outskirts, I couldn't help but think that I had come far too close to death this time. When Colonel Sue had proven to be a reasonable man and announced his surrender, I had barely managed to hide my relief. Sure, if it had come to a fight I was confident Visha and the rest would have torn the enemy mages to shreds, but I was only human myself. If the Legadonian aerial mages had put their mind to it, it would have been all too possible for them to take me down before their own inevitable deaths.

Revealing myself to them had been a necessary risk. I needed my reputation to be about more than the sheer efficiency with which I destroyed the enemies of the Empire using the mysterious Wunderwaffen developed by Division Y. If I wanted to avoid being prosecuted for war crimes after the war was over, I needed to build up my image as a reasonable person, willing to take prisoners and treat them well. And since the Untoten hadn't taken any, that meant Colonel Sue and his band of merry men.

After he'd accepted to surrender, I'd gone down to make the same offer to the scattered Legadonian units rushing desperately to try and prepare to fight back the Imperial forces they had no hope of defeating, even without our intervention. The sight of the Untoten descending from the sky, illuminated by the burning coastal guns and with their own aerial mages captured, had been enough to break what was left of their morale, and they had surrendered in droves, much to the bemusement of the Imperial soldiers who had arrived minutes later.

Of course, I hadn't gambled with my life blindly. I had watched the Legadonians from a distance, and realized that at least half of them were new recruits, which meant that the more veteran-looking Colonel had seen many of his men die in the war his government had started. I had bet that he wasn't a fanatical patriot and wouldn't want to see more of them die pointlessly, and that had paid off well.

Really, 'a calculated bet that had paid off' was a pretty good description for how the entire operation had gone down, despite my misgivings when General Rudersdorf had asked me to

figure out a way to use the fruits of Division Y's work to break the deadlock of the Northern front before the arrival of winter.

We had deployed deep behind enemy lines in the middle of the night thanks to the Untoten, who had carried me and the occultists of Division Y who had accompanied me to the Northern front.

These so-called occultists were researchers of Division Y with a talent for magic that wasn't strong enough to get them drafted as aerial mages, but was enough for them to take part in the rituals designed by the Denkmaschine. I didn't like the term myself, finding it had far too many cult-like connotations for my liking, but that was my modern prejudices at work. In this world, prior to the revolution of the mage orb, occultists had been middling mages, often from wealthy families, who sought to delve into the mysteries of magic. For many of them, working in Division Y was the first honest job they had ever had in their lives, which went a long way to explain the Division's lamentable state when I had first been assigned to it.

Technically speaking, my presence hadn't been needed. But I wasn't going to let this happen without me being present to take action if something went wrong with the ritual, nor did I want to let the Untoten get any further from my sight than absolutely necessary. And besides, I would one-hundred-per-cent get the blame if things went badly, so I might as well be in a position to make sure I got as much of the credit as possible if they went right.

And gone right they had. Projekt N, Nebel, had only been tested on a much smaller scale before today, but it had outdone my wildest expectations. The fog had completely blocked the Entente's sight and comms, allowing the Untoten to infiltrate their naval bases and wreak havoc on their guns and personnel. I could imagine the terror of the men trapped inside the bunkers with vampires on the hunt, though at least the gas masks had kept the Untoten from feeding (I didn't want to leave corpses drained of blood behind, nor give Visha and the others a taste for blood taken by force).

The Untoten's ability to detect life had less range than a mage's mana detection, but it operated on an entirely different system and wasn't impaired by Projekt N or by magical decoys, which had been one of the key factors behind the Osfjord attack's success. Combine that with their undetectable flight, superhuman speed, strength and durability, and when fuelled by increased rations of mage blood, the Untoten were less Dracula-style vampires and more knock-off undead Supermen when it came to battle. And even a knock-off Kryptonian was still a terrific mage hunter, as this operation had proved many times over.

We had burned through nearly our entire stock in pushing the Entente out of Norden, though, and most of the remainder in the days since. While I had made sure we had enough left to satisfy their basic requirements, I wouldn't be able to let them loose again to this degree anytime soon. Which was going to be a headache and a half, since the rest of the Imperial Army would doubtless be very enthusiastic about using them in the future, and I couldn't exactly explain why that wasn't possible. Hopefully I could shout 'classified' at them until they gave up.

I was pretty sure whatever passed for their metabolism was far better at processing mana than even the most elite of human mage, since there was no way the blood they ingested contained enough power to fuel them that long at that level of activity. That, or the Untoten broke the

law of conservation of energy somehow, which was unfortunately equally likely now that I thought about it.

The entire Legadonian defense of Osfjord had been gutted in less than an hour. Less than twenty Untoten had killed hundreds of enemy soldiers and command personnel before sabotaging the big guns, leaving the area ripe for the Navy and Army to capture once we were done dispelling the supernatural mist. I had been very firm in my instructions that the rest of the Imperial forces were to wait for my signal before advancing, and to my deep relief they had followed the plan instead of charging in the moment the fog started to thin.

That was good because, despite its innocuous name, Projekt N was, if my understanding of the eldritch spell's structure was correct, the breath of some manner of cosmic entity summoned into our world (hopefully without it noticing). We had tested its effects on farm animals in Castle Schwartzstein, and found that any exposure of less than two hours had no long-term negative effects on pigs, which were the closest we could get to human testing without dipping into our limited pool of death row convicts. Even a short exposure could cause panic and a wide array of temporary issues, however, none of which I wanted to inflict on the Imperial troops of the Northern front.

The fog was more dangerous the closer to the source, which was why I and the occultists all wore gas masks (the Untoten did as part of their standard sunproof uniforms, and just to be safe I had told them to dispense with the act of breathing as much as possible during the operation). Sue hadn't seemed to be affected by the mist when we had talked, but since he was an aerial mage, he had probably been using a breathing spell as soon as we had begun the operation. As the first mages to be exposed to Projekt N, I had no doubt the Colonel and his men were going to be subjected to all manner of medical tests by curious researchers of Division Y, but I was sure I could disguise those as part of the standard treatment afforded all prisoners of war in civilized countries.

… As long as I kept the more demented of my researchers from cutting them up. That would be something to keep an eye on. None of Division Y's personnel were that far gone yet (or if they were, they were worryingly good at keeping it secret), but considering what we were working on, I was certain it was only a matter of time.

After the battle of the Osfjord was over and the city Os had been secured, the Entente had started to fold like a house of cards. Given that we had their main force surrounded and had essentially ripped out their logistical heart, they could hardly be blamed for that. The frontline had completely collapsed, as soldiers were cut off from supplies and forced to choose between surrender or death by starvation and exposure.

I had sent Visha and the others to assist in the clean-up operations, following the same procedures that had served us so well during the conquest of Norden. Moving in standard four-men platoons, the Untoten had hunted down the remaining Legadonian mages who hadn't surrendered, doing their best to capture them alive if possible so that they could be shipped off to the same prison camp where Colonel Sue and his men were held. Enough had still died that, if Division Y had been a more public part of the Imperial Army, several of the Untoten would now qualify as Aces. Of course, given that a suspicious number of these suicidally brave 'Legadonian mages' had clearly been foreigners sent by the other powers as

part of their efforts to support the Entente, we couldn't have claimed them as kills even if the Untoten had been regular aerial mages.

Well, excessive glory brought more problems than it solved, in the end. Despite my best efforts at information control, there were already rumors circulating of the masked, elite aerial mages who struck without warning and left only death and destruction in their wake.

The Untoten had also launched night raids on holdout Legadonian positions, though such assaults had seen a much lower ratio of enemy survivors. Non-mage soldiers were, according to a disturbingly smiling Visha, 'too squishy' for the Untoten to leave alive during combat : the Untoten had to make a deliberate effort to kill a mage who knew they were there, while simple soldiers were too easy to kill when the vampires were in combat and exerting the full potential of their transformed bodies, boosting their physical abilities in exchange for an increased consumption of their blood reserves.

In the end, Projekt U hadn't sustained a single casualty, and the injuries they had taken had been easily healed with increased blood rations and rest. I was pleased to see that the extensive flight and combat training I had put the Untoten through had been worth the effort. Of course, such brilliant results were partially due to the total advantage of surprise they had enjoyed : sooner or later the other countries would adapt to the unique abilities possessed by our small corps of flying vampire soldiers.

Still, I wouldn't have wanted to be the poor schmuck tasked with figuring out a way to counter them. I had designed a handful of possibilities myself, if only to know what to expect once the enemy started to adapt (and also in case of mutiny, but so far that possibility seemed very remote), but none of them were especially easy to implement, and I'd had the advantage of knowing exactly what the Untoten were capable of.

We hadn't deployed Projekt N again after the fall of Osfjord : not only had there been no need for it, I was wary of using it on such a large scale again so soon. The planet was still here and in one piece, so clearly we hadn't woken up the eldritch horror responsible for creating the fog, but that wasn't the kind of dice I wanted to roll if I could at all help it. The occultists might be confident that there was absolutely no risk of that, but I was more than happy to be overly paranoid and cautious on that subject.

Someone needed to be, after all, and even if my worst nightmare couldn't become true, I was also wary of the effects of repeated rituals on the occultists themselves. Back in my old world, it was pretty much established lore that dealing with the Mythos took a toll on sanity that got worse every time, and I really didn't need to deal with that on top of everything else.

Still, all in all, this little jaunt had gone remarkably well, and it was time for us to return to Castle Schwartzstein. I had already been gone far too long : who knew what the rest of Division Y had gotten up to in my absence. And hopefully, the higher-ups would leave us alone this time … ah, who was I kidding. It was two miracles we had done for them now. I should probably expect to find our next assignment waiting for me when I arrived.

Curse you, Being X !

---

*LEGADONIAN ENTENTE DEFEATED !*

*Yesterday, after more than a year of bitter warfare following the unprovoked attack by the Legadonian Entente on our beloved Empire, the nation responsible for starting the Great War has formally capitulated. The representatives of the Council of Ten, Legadonia's ruling body, have met with the Brigadier General Kurt von Rudersdorf, acting commander of the Northern Army, and signed their surrender (see photograph above).*

*The terms of the surrender include a formal recognition of the Entente's responsibility in starting the Great War and plunging the world into chaos, and a promise of paying reparations as well as handing over those politicians who made the callous and absurd decision to invade the Imperial Norden region. All Legadonian military personnel is to disarm, and the nation's military facilities will be occupied by the Empire until the end of the war, while all stocks of war resources will also be claimed. Apart from these most reasonable demands, however, the Empire is gracious in its victory : the Kaiser himself, in an announcement made earlier today, voiced his hopes that this will be the first step toward the reconciliation between our two nations.*

*This great victory was made possible by the fall of the city of Os ten days ago, accomplished in a daring manoeuvre by our brave soldiers. Using stealth technology developed in the most secret laboratories of our glorious empire, elite commandos were able to infiltrate the Entente strongholds and disable their mighty guns, leaving the way open for our Navy to claim Os. This left the Entente army trapped between our forces pushing north from Norden and the troops having disembarked at Os, leaving them no choice but to lay down their arms to avoid annihilation.*

*Once again, the Fatherland's glorious sons have proved that there is no army in the world that can match their prowess and ingenuity !*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, December 10th, 1924.

---

*"Mrs Sue,*

*It is my duty to inform you that your husband, Colonel Anson Sue, was captured and is presently in the custody of the Imperial Army.*

*Per the provisions of the Worms Convention regulating the treatment of prisoners during war, you might petition for the chance to visit him. Attached to this letter are the procedures you need to follow to make the visiting request, as well as the security measures you'll need to follow once your request is granted.*

*Be assured that your husband is being treated humanly, and is in excellent health. He fought with bravery and honor, and surrendered when he realized that the only thing continuing to fight would achieve would be to throw away his life and, more importantly to him, those of the brave Legadonian soldiers under his command.*

*If you have any further question or are in need of assistance filling the forms, you can ask for help at the nearest Imperial occupation office, the address of which should have been posted*

*on your local news bulletin or be available at your city hall or equivalent."*

Letter from the Imperial Occupation Office to the house of Colonel Anson Sue, December 12th, 1924.

---

*"I still consider myself the same person as I was before my death and resurrection. I have all my memories, all my skills, and all my emotions. When I think of my parents, I still feel the same sorrow for their deaths in Rus. When I think of my aunt and uncle who took me in, it is with a surge of gratitude that they don't have to live with the grief of my death, even if I can only exchange censored letters with them for now.*

*The same is true for the rest of my peers. We have changed, that much is undeniable. Killing holds little terror for us now, regardless of how used to it we were before, and our desire for blood has replaced that for all other food. But aren't all soldiers changed by their experiences in war ? Would anyone dare to say that the veteran returning from the trenches of the Rhine isn't the same person who went in, except as a metaphor for how deeply they've been affected by what they witnessed ? It is the same for us.*

*Yes, our hunger for blood has the potential to drive us to bestial madness, even if the Major has forbidden any attempt to test that. But isn't that the case of all people ? In my lost homeland of Rus, starvation and despair brought about by the Tzar's incompetence were enough to drive the peasants and workers to revolt against their masters, despite the terrible odds they faced. Even if their Revolution ended up successful, surely those who raised the first pitchfork must've known their chances of survival were slim – but hunger pushed them to make the attempt regardless.*

*The same is true in the Empire, I think. Even the most loyal Imperial soldier will revolt if her superior wilfully deny her the food she needs to live. But I know the Major will never do such a thing. She is far too wise, and far too kind, even if she doesn't really show it.*

*We are no longer human, but we are still people. And whatever our origins, we were all reborn here, in Castle Schwartzstein. Through this rebirth, the Empire is our one true homeland, and we will fight to defend it under Major Degurechaff, no matter what the world throws against us."*

Excerpt from the writings of Viktoriya Serebryakov, archived as part of the ongoing evaluation of the Untoten's mental state by Division Y.

---

*"Concerning what happened at the Osfjord, the damage inflicted on the defenders under the cover of a mysterious fog resembles that inflicted by full-enhanced combat mages going against normal soldiers. Yet the Entente possessed its own mages, and while a significant portion of them were unable to react in time and ended up surrendering (efforts to contact them in captivity in order to learn more are ongoing), there were still a not insignificant number left in the areas that were wiped out prior to the advance of the conventional Imperial forces.*

*We found no evidence of Imperial casualties during that vanguard assault, so if there were losses, their bodies were removed prior to the arrival of our operatives. How the Imperials were able to deploy a strike force of such potency ahead of their main army without being detected eludes us for now : our intelligence indicates that the mist began to form well behind the front line, blocking radio transmissions and making mana detection far less reliable. This indicates that the Imperials managed to infiltrate the Entente's territory prior to the mist's deployment. Our best theory is that they used some kind of high-altitude insertion, dropping a handful of mages from aircraft before deploying the mist and disabling the Osfjord's defenses.*

*Despite the differences in execution, it is our belief that the same Imperial organization was involved in the sudden collapse of the Legadonian Entente as was responsible for the inhumane massacre of the Dacian Army. Obviously, the weapon that killed thousands of Dacians wasn't the same one as was deployed at Osfjord, but it seems likely the two came from the same Imperial research branch. We have found traces of messages being exchanged between Central Headquarters and a group called Division Y, asking for their assistance on the Northern Front, mere weeks before the disaster at the Osfjord. Further investigation has revealed that Division Y was also responsible for the destruction of the Dacian Army, although it appears that the scale of that victory took even the Imperials by surprise : whether this was due to the efficiency of Division Y's Wunderwaffen or the incompetence of the Dacians remains unclear at the moment.*

*If the results of our investigation are correct, Division Y operates under the sole authority of the Empire's Central Headquarters, but is based in a single secret location we have yet to discover. We will continue our efforts to locate this research facility, but as would be expected, the Empire is keeping a very tight hold on such critical information."*

Excerpt from the report of Agent 404, Albion Secret Service, December 20th, 1924.

---

*December 21st, 1924 – Londinium*

In a room whose luxurious decor belied the seriousness of the matter at hand, several of the Allied Kingdom's most powerful men were gathered. Glasses of expensive alcohol were left forgotten on the table around which they sat, and their expressions were grim as they finished reading the compilation of their latest intel on the state of the Great War. They weren't all the members of this group, but they were the ones with the most involvement in the current situation, and the ones who had been available when the report had come in.

One of the men was an old soldier who had survived long enough to rise to the very top of the Kingdom's military hierarchy. In this group, he went by the title of Kay. Another was a spymaster whose agents were spread across the world, playing the Great Game for the good of the Allied Kingdom : his seat was that of Agravain. A third was the Royal Wizard, personal advisor to the King and his representatives in all magical matters, who was, obviously, called Merlin. The fourth occupied a position within the government it would take many hours to explain to someone uninitiated to the complex inner workings of the Allied Kingdom, but which carried considerable influence on its foreign policy. He was called, in what was almost certainly a joke from their ancestors that had turned into tradition, Mordred.

They were all very different people, united by their dedication to their country and the fact that they were all descended from some of the Kingdom's oldest noble lineages. In one way or another, their families had worked together in the shadows to serve crown and country for generations, yet never in all that time had they encountered a conundrum such as they one they faced now.

"Well," said the old soldier as he finally put down the rapport, "this is a fine mess. Merlin, what do you make of it ?"

"I will need to check against the archives of my office, but off the top of my head ? Just like with what happened to the Dacian Army, Albion has never encountered anything like this fog. The magic described in there just … don't make sense, according to any magical school I can think of."

"So the Imperials really have discovered some cache of pre-Inquisition magical knowledge ?" asked Agravain. Merlin shook his head.

"They might have, but that alone wouldn't explain what we've seen so far. I believe what we are seeing now is the result of the same Imperial ingenuity used in the rest of their warmachine having been applied to magical research. We are talking about the nation that invented the computation orb, after all : it makes sense that they wouldn't rest on their laurels after such a feat."

"So all this time, while the rest of us struggled to catch up to their orbs, they were also performing research for military application of wide-scale magic beyond the basics of magical artillery, flight and reinforcements ?"

"It seems likely. Surely these 'Wunderwaffen' we are seeing now must be the result of years of careful research and development, decades even."

"And I didn't catch a sniff of it until the bullets were already flying," muttered Agravain, crestfallen.

"At least we have a name for them now," Mordred tried to reassure his peer. "Division Y, wasn't it ?"

"Yes." Agravain suddenly seemed a lot more animated. "I'll have my people do all they can to learn more. Knowing that the organization exists should help us in that regard. As long as there was peace and no need for them to involve themselves with the rest of the world, there was little opportunity for us to learn about them, but the cat's out of the bag now."

"That's all well and good," cut in Kay, "but that still leaves us in a very bad position. The Francois Republic is the only contestant left in the war, but they can't face the full might of the Empire alone. They will give the Imperials a fight, make no mistake, but they will lose, even if there are no more Wunderwaffen waiting in the wings. And then the Empire will become the continent's unchallenged hegemon, precisely what we've been trying to avoid for decades."

"They have received the remaining Entente troops, right ?" asked Merlin.

"They did," confirmed Kay, "for all the good that will do. The ships of the leftover Entente fleet that managed to slip the noose of the Imperial North Fleet are a welcome addition to the Republic's own naval assets, but they aren't going to be of much use in the Rhine, and the soldiers aboard are barely worth a single division, and escaped with little heavy equipment. Mages would've been useful, but the Imperials hunted them down relentlessly, and only a handful made it out."

"What about the situation in Legadonia itself ?" asked Mordred. "We have their lawful government under our protection. Can we use that to take some pressure off the Republic ?"

It had been the single silver lining in the whole disaster that was the collapse of the Entente, beyond the salvage of a handful of Legadonian units by the Francois Republic. The evacuation of the Legadonian Foreign Affairs Councilor Abensoll ahead of the Imperial advance had gone off without a hitch, and the man was now safe in Londinium, having just finished announcing his presence in a press conference to the international news organizations. Given how much time and effort had gone into ensuring his safe escape, Mordred certainly had good reasons to hope for a suitable return on investment.

"Well, it's certainly better to have the man here than not, but he isn't going to be of much use in that regard, I'm afraid," sighed Agravain. "The Entente's population is well aware that their last government started the war, and then their current one lost it and either ran away or started collaborating with the Empire."

According to Abensoll, whom Agravain had met in person soon after the man's arrival, that had been a deliberate decision by the Council of Ten. While keeping the flame of resistance lit was important, ensuring that the Empire treated the people of Legadonia well was equally important to the unfortunates who had inherited the previous government's mess. He understood their motives, truly he did, but it would still have made his job and that of the Allied Kingdom easier if the Entente had chosen to fight to the death.

"As a result," he continued, "trust in their political institutions, which already wasn't that high, is at an all-time low. Hell, some of them are clamoring to become part of the Empire and I'm not even sure they are Imperial plants. We can use him for legal purposes, but I don't see any fiery radio speeches inflaming the flame of Legadonian resistance in the future. The Imperials are also too smart to commit any atrocity we can use to rally the population against the occupation."

"They are just going to roll over and submit ?" asked Kay, appalled. "After everything ? We supported them for months, sent several dozens of our most promising young mages to help them, and they are just going to give up like that ?"

The loss of these young mages had hit the Kingdom hard, and Kay especially so. They had been sent as 'volunteer corps', clad in the flimsy fiction that they were acting on their own to avoid dragging the Kingdom into the war before it chose. The goal had been to help the Entente, but also to learn more about the Empire's methods and to let them gain experience in this new, terrible kind of war. Instead, they had disappeared during the lightning-quick Imperial capture of Norden, just like almost every aerial mage that had been deployed there, and whatever intelligence they'd gathered had been lost.

"I didn't say that," assured Agravain. "The previous government spent years papering over the country's bad economic state by stoking the flames of patriotism, after all. I am certain there will be acts of resistance against the Imperials, and we should definitely look into supporting and arming them to take some pressure off the Republic. But I very much doubt they'll amount to much in the grand scheme of things."

"And the shock of Dacia's sudden defeat has left them stunned and unwilling to fight back and risk a repeat," continued Kay, still frowning. "Unless the Francois can pull off a miracle, we are going to have to join the war ourselves, gentlemen." Left unsaid was that, so far, it was the Empire that was pulling miracles out of thin air – or rather, out of the mysterious Division Y's arsenal. "We might be able to pull in someone else, but I don't think anyone will join in unless we do it first. I am going to make sure our troops will be ready when it comes to that."

"I will send feelers to the ambassadors we have here," declared Mordred. "See who is ready to join in before the Empire becomes the dominant power of the century. The Unified States don't have much skin in the game yet, but the Russy Federation should be willing to help if we make the right promises."

"And I will continue searching the archives for either an explanation or a counter to the Empire's magical arsenal," said Merlin. "Any additional intelligence you can provide would help immensely in that regard, Agravain."

"Understood. As for me, well, I am going to keep my people very busy. I probably should look into doing something nice for them all too."

There were a few more exchanges, then, after a round of goodbyes and finally draining their glasses (it was just too fine of a vintage to waste), the four members of the Allied Kingdom's unofficial Round Table left to attend to their respective duties.

---

*"You are alive. You're really ... I am so glad. When I received that letter, I was so scared that you had ... that you ..."*

*"Hush, darling. It's okay. I'm fine, see ? Perfectly healthy ?"*

*"Really ? Then what's that bandage on your arm ?"*

*"Oh, that ? Haha, nothing to worry about. The military doctors here took some blood from everyone this morning, to check that we didn't catch anything on the front. They don't want us to fall sick and be accused of poisoning us or something, after all."*

*"If you gave blood, then you will enjoy this : I brought you some food. It has your favourite in it. Me and Mary made it together after the officer I contacted told me care packages were allowed. Think of it as an early Christmas present."*

*"Oh, nice ! The food here is, well, it's filling, but it's not that I would call great great. I can't complain, though : apparently it's the exact same stuff they give to their own soldiers. I guess*

*the old joke about an army being stronger the worse its food is was more true than I thought."*

*"I made enough for you to share with your men. I have been in touch with their families : we are thinking of doing a rotation to bring you food regularly."*

*"That … that would be great. We are getting regular exercise and we can ask for books from the local library, but we will all welcome the diversion. How is Mary doing ?"*

*"Better now that she knows you are fine and the war is over. She, well, she's too young to really care about the country. She just wanted you to come home safe."*

*"I'm not home yet. But … here. I wrote her a letter. Course, our friends from the Empire read it to make sure I didn't give out any military secrets. I wouldn't want Mary to get dragged into this mess anyway."*

*"I'll give it to her. She wanted to come, but this isn't a place for someone so young … What's wrong ?"*

*"Nothing, sorry. Just a weird thought."*

*"If you say so. Anyway, Mary told me to remind you to shave so that she can kiss you when you come home. Do you … do you know when you'll be released ?"*

*"No. It's complicated : the Entente is out of the war, but with the government-in-exile calling for everyone to resist the occupation, the Empire can't exactly release aerial mages into the wild. If the occupation goes badly, I've been told we might even be shipped off to a prison camp in the Empire's homeland, just to be safe."*

*"… Oh. Those damn cowards. It's not enough that they ran away and abandoned the country, they have the audacity to tell others to risk their lives ?"*

*"They want Legadonia to keep its dignity and regain its independence, and they think the Empire's defeat is the best way to achieve that. Making the occupation as painful as possible helps their position, since it makes a liberation push more tempting. I told Mary in my letter that I don't want her to even think about joining some half-baked resistance – our country declared war without being prepared for it for a stupid reason, we lost, and the Empire is frankly treating us better than we've any right to expect. I refuse to believe jeopardizing our people's lives just to help the bureaucrats and politicians score points is the right thing to do."*

*"I don't think Mary would do anything so dangerous, Anson. If you had gotten hurt, or worse, then maybe … But she's a sweet girl."*

*"I know, but she's still young. If she falls in with a bad crowd … Just, please make sure she stays safe, okay ? I trust my men wouldn't do anything stupid, but the temptation would be too much for many people. "*

*"Alright, I will make sure she understands."*

*"Thanks. In any case, that's why I probably won't be able to come home until the rest of the war is over."*

*"... At least you are alive. I will pray that the Francois Republic sees reason quickly and starts negotiating peace so that you can come home."*

*"As will I, darling. As will I."*

Excerpt from the exchange between Anson Sue and his visiting wife, overseen and recorded as per standard Imperial protocol for prisoners of war in possession of dangerous intelligence, December 23rd, 1924.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Well, I ended up writing this much faster than I thought I would.

Due to the overwhelming positive reaction to this story's first chapter (especially on SpaceBattles), my plans for this fic have undergone some revisions. Specifically, it isn't going to be limited to just six chapters anymore. The many suggestions and comments have kicked my muse into overdrive for this fic, and I have a lot of pages of notes to develop and source material to read.

Also, after realizing that my recollection of this chapter's canon equivalent was very oversimplified, I had to overhaul a bunch of stuff. Part of it was the acceleration of the Entente's defeat and surrender compared to canon. Mostly this is to simplify things in the story, but the in-universe reason is that the Entente took heavier losses when they were pushed out of Norden due to the Untoten hunting at night, and the capture of Os completely collapsed the defensive screen they had just barely managed to put together. Between that, the Untoten continuing to operate in the Entente afterwards, and the impact on morale of Imperial propaganda playing up the Wunderwaffen, the Entente collapsed much faster than in canon, forcing the Councilors who stayed behind to surrender.

(Yes, I shouldn't explain this in the AN, but you try to put a discussion of the differences between two different timelines in the main story.)

As for Mary Sue's destiny as Tanya's nemesis being derailed, don't worry, there will be other antagonists for Tanya to deal with once the rest of the world is given some time to react to Division Y's actions so far. Keep in mind that in-universe, it's barely been a month since the slaughter of the Dacian Army (which, by the way, was indeed based on a scene from the Overlord series, as several of you suggested : I'm pretty sure these particular eldritch abominations are smaller in the original material). Even the pseudo-Round Table is only now starting to get actionable intel. By the way, if you have names to suggest for its members (beyond their nicknames), I very much welcome them. Finding names for characters is always a chore for me.

The suggestions for more Projekte are welcome too, and don't limit yourselves solely to existing elements of the Mythos. Projekt Nebel wasn't inspired by anything in particular as far as I am aware (it's always possible my subconscious pulled a fast one on me again), after all. The next chapter, however, will include something that should be more familiar to fans of the Mythos ... or at least a specific spin-off TTRPG.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts on this chapter. Oh, and happy New Year, everybody.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*April 8th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

Brigadier General Hans von Zettour sat alone in his office, and pondered the state of the Empire.

Their great victory over the Legadonian Entente had been marred by the successful escape of the nation's Navy, which had slipped by the Imperial Navy's cordon and promptly joined up with the Francois Republic. Combined with the exile of two Councilors, one in Francois and the other in Albion, the most fervent Entente nationalists had plenty of reasons to resist the Empire's occupation of their country. The government-in-exile had called for 'all faithful citizens of the Fatherland to fight back against Imperial oppression', as if their nation hadn't been the ones to start the war that had set Europa ablaze in the first place.

Thankfully, there hadn't been any serious incidents so far, but the years spent by the Legadonian government using patriotic rhetoric to hide their own ineptitude had left a mark. It would've been much better if the Navy'd done its one important job since the start of the Great War. Zettour knew he was being too harsh : keeping watch over an entire sea was all but impossible, and the Legadonian Navy was far more experienced than the Empire's, due to their respective countries' geographies.

The Western front had been a bloody mess since the start of the Republic's surprise attack, and things had only gotten worse as the conflict dragged on. Thousand upon thousand of Imperial soldiers had died, and dozens of aerial mages had been thrown into the grinder in a desperate effort to buy time. Only with the Entente taken care of had the Empire been free to focus the bulk of its power on its old rival, the Francois Republic, finally stopping their advance and beginning to push back.

Now at last, the Empire was on the offensive, having forced the Republic troops out of its lands and continued onward, seizing much territory, albeit at a monstrous cost in lives and materiel. Unfortunately, the Republic now enjoyed the benefit of shorter supply lines, meaning that the cost of every meter of ground had inflated to even more grotesque heights.

There had been several pointed suggestions over the last few months that they ignore the Major's recommendations and order Division Y to deploy Projekt K on the Rhine front. Zettour had shut them down immediately. If Tanya Degurechaff believed something was too dangerous, then it was too dangerous. He'd seen the request forms she'd sent : the girl (and she was still a girl, God help them, she was only eleven years old) wasn't squeamish, that was certain. Having read for himself the interrogation reports of captured Dacian soldiers who had managed to survive the calamity that had befallen their nation's ill-prepared army, the Brigadier General shuddered at the thought of unleashing such horror again anywhere, let alone close to Imperial soldiers.

Fortunately, the Major had been quick to offer alternatives. Zettour's old friend Rudersdorf had been very impressed with her strategic insight when they'd worked together in the Northern front. Under her leadership, Division Y hadn't just provided the Empire with the Wunderwaffen, going far beyond all but the most delirious of expectations anyone had for the secret group. Degurechaff had made sure to research the tactical applications of each of the Projekte.

Zettour was still grasping with how much of a paradigm shift Projekt U would represent in the long run – aerial mages that couldn't be detected by conventional magical radars and could fight in close-quarters to devastating effect ? That alone would have been worth all the money and manpower poured into Division Y and more.

Really, Division Y as a whole was an incredibly profitable investment for the Empire, providing weapons of such awesome power and potency with what was, in the grand scheme of things, a mere rounding error of the Imperial Army's total operating budget. Completely unlike Elenium Arms, which had consumed even more resources in their pursuit of multi-core orbal technology, only to end in disaster. Almost the entire Kruskos Army Air Corps Testing Lab, both facilities and personnel, had been lost in the cataclysmic explosion of the Type-95's final test.

According to the few survivors, Dr Schugel, the head of the project, had grown incensed when his superiors had decided to cut his funding due to nobody managing to make his quad-core computing orb work, and forced through one final test where he'd disabled most of the safeties on the device for reasons nobody really understood. The resulting detonation had been seen all the way to Berun, and it had taken a lot of work to convince the population that this wasn't anything to worry about, just … what had been the excuse they had used again ? Zettour couldn't quite recall. Something about a faulty artillery shell, insinuating the source of the light had been much closer than it had actually been ? Well, it hardly mattered.

Schugel had apparently been so confident it would work this time that he'd been standing right next to ground zero, meaning there hadn't been a scrap of his body left to be found. When compared to the stringent safety protocols Major Degurechaff insisted all of Division Y's researchers follow, there just wasn't any comparison. Hopefully she'd be able to get some use out of the Elenium research notes and prototypes Zettour had sent to Castle Schwartzstein. He knew Division Y had worked with orbal technology before, in fact their entire incredible success was due to that Denkmaschine they'd cobbled together in order to implement Degurechaff's theories. He'd also looked into transferring the budget of Elenium labs over to them, but by the time he got to it most of the money had already been reassigned. The leftovers still represented a significant sum, though.

It was shameful, how much the entire nation relied on Degurechaff. All the might of the Empire at their disposal, and they still needed to ask an eleven-years old girl and the organization she had built from the scraps and refuse they had thrown together to help fighting their wars. Of course, Zettour would never cheapen the skill, bravery and sacrifices of the soldiers fighting on the frontlines : if failure there was, then it rested solely on them at Central Headquarters.

And now, they were going to ask for her assistance once more. On his desk, surrounded by other documents, was the latest telegraph he'd received from Castle Schwartzstein. It was the response Major Degurechaff had sent to his request for the assistance of Division Y in the West. Like most communications from Degurechaff, it was short and to the point. She was informing him that, she was personally going to the Rhine, accompanied by most instances of Projekt U and all those of Projekt W – few as the latter were, and asking for his authorization to deploy them.

Projekt W … Zettour remembered reading the specs for that particular branch of Division Y's work. As the one responsible for the Division at Central Command, he was regularly briefed on each of the ongoing Projekte. The documents were brought in by a grim-faced soldier who watched as they were set ablaze once the Brigadier General was done reading them, but his memory was as sharp as ever, and he remembered their contents clearly. Projekt W would certainly be useful on the muddy, bloody battlefields of the Rhine, of this he was certain.

Sat on his chair, Hans von Zettour smiled bitterly and, as he ratified the authorization documents to be sent back to Castle Schwartzstein, whispered a prayer for the Francois soldiers who were about to meet the creations of Division Y.

*May God have mercy on their souls, for the Untoten and Werwölfe certainly won't.*

---

*April 15th, 1925 – The Rhine Front*

Lieutenant Schwarkopf couldn't believe his own eyes as he stared at the woman standing at the side of Major von Degurechaff. At first, he'd thought his one remaining eye was playing tricks on him in the poor illumination of the trenches at night-time, but no, there was no mistake.

He'd seen her die. It had been mercifully quick by this awful war's standards : a sniper bullet to the heart during a moment's inattention, and the mage rookie had been dead before she hit the mud. Even a grisly veteran like himself had felt a twinge of sorrow at the passing of such a young woman, as well as bitterness at the wastefulness of it all. He knew she'd been conscripted because of her high magical aptitude, but what was the point of mandatory mage conscription if they got killed like that ? At that rate, it would be better to stop the conscription and spend the resources wasted on training the conscripts before sending them off to die on actual, proper training for the volunteers.

He hadn't voiced these thoughts aloud, of course, morale being already far too shaky among his men despite their best efforts to keep a smile on their faces. Instead, he'd signed Serebryakov's death notice and sent her body home, thinking that at least her family would have something to bury, which was sadly a rarity for soldiers who fell in the Rhine.

And yet, here she was, standing before him in a uniform he'd never seen before, with a small smile on her face that told him she'd also recognized him.

"Is something wrong, Visha ?" asked the diminutive Major (Schwarkopf had needed to double-check her rank insignia before his brain would accept what his eye was telling him)

who stood next to the resurrected rookie at the head of the score of intimidating soldiers who had just arrived at the forward operation base where Schwarkopf's mages were based.

"Nothing's wrong, Major," answered Serebryakov. "I used to serve alongside Lieutenant Schwarkopf before my transfer to Division Y, that's all."

"Ah, I see. I'm sure you have questions, Lieutenant, but I'm afraid the answers are classified."

"I … I understand." He most certainly didn't, but he also didn't want to annoy someone associated with the miracle weapons that had crushed Dacia an Legadonia, even if part of him did feel annoyed that the Rhine hadn't received any Wunderwaffe support of its own earlier. "I was told you were going to spearhead a night attack on the enemy trenches ?"

"That is correct. These fine gentlemen will open the way, but they can hardly hold ground by themselves. We'll be imposing on you and the rest of the forces in this outpost to actually advance the line after it has been cleared of the Francois soldiers."

Schwarkopf had trouble imagining how so few men could accomplish that, but he'd heard the stories of what had happened on the other theatres where the Wunderwaffen had been deployed.

"What will the signal for our advance be ?"

The Major smiled, and the Lieutenant felt a shiver down his spine.

"Oh, trust me, Lieutenant Schwarkopf. You will know it when you hear it."

---

*Mud. Rain. Blood. Pain.*

*He is laying on the ground, his body torn apart by shrapnel. His leg – where is his leg ? He wants to ask, but he can't speak. His lower jaw is gone : he sees the pearly white of his teeth slowly sinking into the mud where it fell. He has to take it, has to put it back on, but he can't.*

*Hands reach out to him, pull him out of the mud, carry him back to safety, to healing that can never hope to undo the damage. In that moment, he both loves and hates the men carrying him, risking their own lives in doing so. Why, oh why couldn't they just leave him to die ?*

*He is alive. Alive, but crippled, never to recover, never to be anything more than a drain on the Empire's strained resources. The drugs coursing through his bloodstream are the only thing keeping him from contorting in agony, but even through the fog they place on his mind a question still dominates his thoughts. Why ? Why even live in such a state ?*

*Cold blue eyes look down at him from within a too-young face. Unlike those of everyone else, there is no pity in them, only thoughtful consideration.*

*"You have a choice to make," she tells him, her words cutting through the drug-induced haze. "You can either die as painlessly as we can make it, or you can go through even greater pain for a chance to serve the Fatherland once more."*

*How ? How can someone like him possibly be of use ? Has he not given enough already ?*

*"Of course," she continues, "I don't expect you to work for nothing. If you choose to serve and survive, I expect you to make a full recovery. Yes, including recovering the parts of yourself you lost."*

*She smiles. It is the smile of the Devil, offering him his heart's desire for his soul.*

*"So ? What do you say ?"*

*What kind of choice is that ? Of course he accepts. Even a glimmer of hope is more than he ever thought he'd ever get.*

*Days, weeks of preparation follow, all blending together. Complex patterns are drawn on what remains of his flesh, carefully working around the scars that cover so much of it. Then it happens, under the light of the full moon. He does not see much, too busy fighting not to scream : they have cut him off painkillers and flushed his system to ensure his mind is clear, and the agony is beyond words.*

*There is more pain to come, just as she promised there would be. The Rite of Union scours what remains of his body, but he's used to suffering now. The pressure on his mind is more difficult, but the thought of healing pushes him to endure.*

*He sees beyond the world, a glimpse of things that he'll forever struggle to remember, and be obscurely relieved for it. In the infinite darkness, something takes notice of his presence. It looks at him – judging, evaluating – and then it seems to approve.*

*He is one, then he is two, then he is one again, but not quite the same as he was before.*

*He opens his eyes and breathes, then realizes his lower jaw is back. He looks down, and sees that his missing leg is there too. The blue-eyed girl is there too, looking down at him approvingly.*

*"So, you made it. Congratulations. How do you feel, Warren Grantz ?"*

*"Grantz ?"*

"Grantz !"

---

Grantz snapped to attention by reflex as the Major's voice pulled him out of the flashback the sight of the Rhine front had caused him. The head of Division Y was looking up at him with a frown, and despite towering above her Grantz felt very, very small in that moment. Fortunately, she must have found whatever she was looking for, because she nodded approvingly.

"I know bringing you back here isn't pleasant," she told him. "But you need to confront your trauma to move beyond it. And after all, things will be different this time, won't they ?"

He nodded. They most certainly would be, he was sure of it. "Yes, Major !"

"Good. Now, listen up, everyone ! Our comrades of the Western Army have fought in this hell for months. It is time for us to do our part to bring this nightmare to an end. You all know your orders, so I won't waste any time repeating them. Projekt U, deploy !"

The Untoten silently took to the air, with only Serebryakov remaining on the ground to make sure nothing happened to the Major. Their position was supposed to be safe from Republican bombardment, but as Grantz knew all too well, safety was an illusion in the Rhine.

He did miss the ability to fly under his own power that he'd enjoyed as an aerial mage. The Rite of Union had crippled his mana reserves, leaving him barely able to use a few cantrips even with a computing orb's assistance. The researchers thought that sacrifice had made him more likely to survive the process, though they didn't exactly have enough data to be certain. In truth, Grantz didn't really care all that much. Flying had been nice, but being able to walk on his own two legs again would have been worth the cost even without all the other advantages he'd gained.

And now, under the Major's command, it was time to wield these gifts in the Fatherland's defense.

"By my authority as the Director of Division Y, and with the authorization of the Imperial Army Headquarters, I declare the first field deployment of Projekt Werwolf officially started." Her solemn gaze swept over them, and she pointed in the direction of the enemy trenches. "Go. Hunt. Kill."

Grantz closed his eyes and called for the part of him that hadn't been there when he had still been wholly human, but was as integral now that he'd become a Werwolf (or, as he'd heard some of the researchers refer to him and the others based on the Rite of Union's formal name, a Tager) as the ones he'd been born with.

He heard the gasps of shock from the Lieutenant and his men as they saw the transformation. Despite the Projekt's name, Grantz knew they looked nothing like wolves, and the transformation wasn't anything like shown in fiction. Their bodies didn't grow and twist into their new shape : instead, flesh materialized around them out of thin air, appearing to cover them like armor, except once the transformation was complete (a process which only took a single breath) there wasn't a human underneath. Even with their regeneration, testing that had been painful, and the Major had made sure those who had volunteered to check had been rewarded with double rations for an entire week.

Each Werwolf was over two meters tall, and almost impossible to tell apart for normal people (although the Major always seemed to know). Their bodies were covered in a flesh-colored carapace, with their thick necks looking like flayed muscle but much, much more resilient. Their hands now had four wicked claws capable of tearing through metal instead of fingers. As for their heads, they were the stuff of nightmares : four pure-white eyes granted them unparalleled perception of their surroundings, an orb was set in their forehead that, to a mage's sense, was crackling with energy. Their mouth was an insectoid thing that vaguely resembled a beak if you didn't look at it too closely or too long.

They were monsters, this Grantz knew, even if it didn't make him recoil. According to the Major, there was a mental component to the Rite of Union : the reason why none of the

Werwölfe ever freaked out at what they had become was the same they could use their transformed bodies and supernatural abilities without needing to re-learn how to operate a body so different from their own, or that Grantz hadn't needed to re-learn how to use his human body after regrowing his lost limb and all the muscle mass he'd lost while wasting away.

He could feel the others in his mind, a mental link that bound them together as pack. They were all ready, and eager for battle, just like Grantz was. That was another change : before, he'd been terrified of combat, even if he'd put on a brave face so that he could do his duty to the Empire. Now all he felt was excitement. He had worried about what it meant, but the Major had assured him it didn't make him any different from most of the war maniacs in the ranks of the Imperial Army, and so far she hadn't seen anything that would prevent him and the others from operating in civilian society, unlike the Untoten and most of the other living creations of Division Y.

With their transformation complete, the pack leapt over the barricades and raced across the no-man's-land. The darkness of night was no obstacle to them : their eyes saw as if in bright daylight, with a clarity that far surpassed any human's vision. They moved fast, far faster than any human soldier could have over the ravaged earth.

The first screams rose as the Untoten plunged down on the enemy positions, taking them completely by surprise. The machine gun emplacements were ripped to shreds, making sure that the only weapons that might be able to put the supersoldiers down were out of the fight. The Untoten moved with a careful economy of movement, not using the full inhuman strength Grantz knew they were capable of : against purely human, non-mage opponents, there was no need for them to waste blood. His ears picked up orders being shouted, as the defenders responded to the sudden assault on their position. Foreigners and invaders they might be, but the men inside those trenches had survived in the Rhine : they were veterans one and all, and they reacted swiftly.

Then the Werwölfe's charge hit the Republican trenches, and the massacre really started.

---

*April 19th, 1925 – Francois Rhine Front Military Headquarters*

The high command of the Republican army met in a grim mood.

In the last three days, the Empire had advanced nearly as much as it had during the entire last three months. Given the ceaseless back-and-forth that was trench warfare, often over mere scores of meters of ground, that wasn't as disastrous as it might seem, but it was still a very worrying trend. And the territorial losses were nothing compared to the casualties and damage to morale that accompanied them. Division Y, that mysterious branch of the Imperial warmachine responsible for the utter destruction of the Dacian Army and the fall of the Legadonian Entente, whose name the Republic only knew thanks to the secret dispatches from the Allied Kingdom, had come to the Rhine and begun to work its foul devilry.

Sunset had become a harbinger of horror for the Francois troops dwelling in the trenches. The mysterious hunters who had so decisively crushed the aerial mage corps in the north had been let loose on the Rhine front, and there was seemingly nothing that could stop them. Even the

elite mage company that had been assembled for the specific purpose of taking down the Empire's Named mages (and who had done so with commendable success for several months) had been wiped out without scoring a single kill in return.

The only thing the Republic had achieved was to obtain descriptions of what had previously been entirely unseen foes, though the rumors of masked, faceless hunters that now circulated as a result were yet another blow to morale. In response, they had started to withdraw all their mages from the frontline during the night, leaving them in heavily-defended locales deep behind their lines. It had crippled their response time to enemy incursions (the Empire hadn't wasted any time in taking advantage once they'd realized what the Republic was doing), but the alternative was a lot of dead mages with nothing to show for it.

The debate as to why the Empire only deployed such an incredible weapon as stealth aerial mages during the night was still raging, with theories ranging from the relatively plausible (a new method of casting vulnerable to sunlight) to the wildly fantastic (the Empire having made a bargain with an ancient vampire who had turned their mages in exchange for the blood of virgins, though that one had been the work of a clearly overworked analyst trying and failing to lighten the mood). But the nocturnal mage-hunters weren't the reason for this meeting. No, that dubious honor belonged to the other strain of terrors unleashed by the Empire on the Republic's valiant defenders. Since its first deployment, all high command had to rely on were the terrified stories of traumatized soldiers who had managed to escape the trenches, ranting about inhuman monsters who cut through armor and shrugged off bullets like raindrops. Now, however, they had proper intel to examine.

By sheer luck, one of the mages who had died during the first Imperial breakthrough had dropped his computing orb only slightly cracked, and a quick-witted soldier had managed to recover it while fleeing from the slaughter. The orb contained a recording of the Imperial attack, though due to its condition it had taken several days of frantic activity to extract the information contained within. Given how pale the technicians who had handed them the record had been, none of the officers present were looking forward to watching it themselves, but it was the least they owed to the brave men who had perished to this latest Imperial perfidy.

The projector stuttered into life, and the record began to play. It had been heavily cut and edited, much of the original footage being useless. But the few scenes that were left were still edifying to say the least.

Monsters. That was the only word to describe the horrors that emerged from the no-man's-land to attack the trench where the orb's mage had been stationed. Seeing them on the screen, the officers couldn't blame the defunct mage for ignoring safety protocols and activating his orb instead of staying dark to avoid detection by the Empire's magical radars. Really, the fact he had the presence of mind of activating his orb's recording function at all was worthy of commendation.

The monsters tore through the trench, completely ignoring the panicked gunfire of the defenders. Long blades grew out of their upper limbs that cut through human skin, flesh and bone like a hot knife through butter.

The scene shifted to show a tank stopped in its tracks as one of the monsters smashed into it. Its claws tore through its metal plating, and then into the terrified crew.

Then another mage launched a magic attack at one of the beasts, rising in the air out of its reach. A blast of energy burst out of its forehead, tore through the mage's protective shell and slammed into his chest, instantly reducing him to a gory, smoking mess.

A nest of black tentacles exploded out of another monster's chest, reaching several meters ahead of it in a cone that ripped half a dozen Republican soldiers to pieces. Horrifically, those were the lucky ones, as the tentacles wrapped around one of the survivors and pulled him back toward the living nightmare. The orbal recording captured the full terror in the man's scream as he was dragged into the source of the tentacles, vanishing along with them, nothing left to mark his doom except for that recording.

The final scene was just an image of the ground as the orb fell, its carrier dead but still running on its last sparks of mana. But the sound was still coming through : a horrific, inhuman howling coming out of multiple throats. It was, the generals felt in their hearts, the sound of the end, of despair and damnation come to devour them all. It was the death knell of the Republic and all it fought for, proudly proclaimed by its harbingers.

The projector's audio speaker sparked and fizzed as it tried and failed to play the sound, eventually breaking down entirely, smoke rising from the apparatus.

As the film ended, a horrified silence held the room in its grasp, only eventually broken by a single, whispered prayer :

"God help us all … The Imperials have unleashed devils upon the Rhine …"

---

*April 21st, 1925 – Imperial rear base on the Rhine Front*

When I had been assigned to Division Y, I had been ecstatic at the thought of avoiding being sent to the frontlines. That joy had been tarnished when I'd realized it would be my job to keep the madmen under my command from destroying the world with the eldritch horrors my own crackpot theory had handed to them, but the notion of not being anywhere anyone could shoot at me had still been a consolation, meagre as it had been.

And yet, somehow I had ended up visiting each of the three fronts of the Great War in person. Nobody had shot at me, and I hadn't shot anyone directly either (though I wasn't enough of a hypocrite to ignore my own responsibility in what I had let loose upon the world), but I was still certain Being X was laughing his ass off at my predicament, the self-righteous prick.

Well, at least I hadn't needed to revisit the frontlines in person since that first night when I had let the Untoten and Werwölfe loose upon the Republic. After the first testing had been a success, I had withdrawn to a more secure location with Visha at my side, receiving daily reports from Castle Schwartzstein and coordinating with the rest of the Imperial warmachine.

That latter activity was necessary because, of course, twenty supersoldiers weren't going to win the war on their own. That would be ridiculous, unless we actually created a Superman-

level soldier, in which case we'd still need to demonstrate their abilities to force the enemy to surrender out of sheer futility while also making sure the godling in question didn't go rogue and doom us all. The supersoldiers of Division Y were all but unstoppable against mages, infantry and even tanks, but they were defenceless against planes or artillery. But as the spearhead of the rest of the Imperial Army, moving in synch with the Empire's own Air Force and artillery corps ? Now that was another story. In the last week, we'd settled into something of a routine : the Untoten and Werwölfe advanced during the night to clear the next Francois defense line, then the conventional Imperial troops followed suit to occupy and fortify the trenches in order to hold them during the day. Rinse and repeat.

Even if the Francois decided to be completely ruthless and shell their own trenches during our nocturnal assaults, it would only slow our advance. The Untoten couldn't use the same barrier spells normal aerial mages could to shield against artillery bombardment, but they could give advance warning to the Werwölfe. Nothing short of a direct impact would kill a Werwolf, and they would recover from anything that didn't kill them in mere moments (that regeneration was truly incredible), so they should be able to exit the bombarded area. It was doubtful the Francois would go that far in any case : in the strange, blood-soaked mindset of trench warfare, there was no sin greater than deliberately shelling your own positions while they were still occupied by your troops. The fact any Francois trench with Werwölfe in it was already lost was irrelevant : the Republican artillerists would still balk at the order, I had been assured of that.

Unfortunately, real war wasn't like a video game, where you could exploit the computer's AI indefinitely and it would keep making the same mistakes over and over. The Empire's enemies were thinking, intelligent people, and they would adapt to our unconventional assets eventually. I struggled to think of how the Republic could react, but I was genre-savvy enough to know that the moment I thought we were invincible was the moment everything would go to hell. Desperation made people consider actions that I, as a sane and rational individual, couldn't imagine, a fact that had been impressed upon me in the last moments of my previous life.

One of the things that worried me the most was the optics of the whole situation. While the testimonies of the Dacian survivors had been dismissed or suppressed, and the Untoten could be explained as elite mages using unknown techniques so long as nobody saw them feeding, there was no explaining away the monstrous nature of Projekt W, which was ironic given that its instances were probably the ones most able to fit in human society. Even with their level of lethality, there had been survivors of their raids who had managed to escape after seeing them, and eventually Republican high command would start taking their reports of monsters seriously. Sure, the first few reports would be discounted as stress-caused hallucinations, but sooner or later the evidence would become impossible to deny.

And then … well. It was one thing for the Empire to wield unknown Wunderwaffen in order to defeat its enemies. It was another to be seen unleashing monsters on the battlefield. Yes, dying to a Werwolf's claws or energy blast wasn't any more painful than dying to a bullet or bleeding out from shrapnel (we weren't sure about being swallowed by the tentacles, but the Werwölfe had told us they were certain their victims died instantly). Somehow, however, I didn't think the average Francois, Albish, or American citizen would understand that point (the Russy citizens weren't a concern, since their government had absolutely zero care for

their opinions). The simple existence of the Wunderwaffen was already a mixed blessing where international relations were concerned : it did make the other powers worried about Imperial expansion, while at the same time making them wary of involving themselves in the Great War.

A single picture of a Werwolf on the front-page of a credible newspaper and we might very well end up fighting a World War against every other civilized nation on the planet as their governments had no choice but to declare war or be overthrown by their own panicked populace. I was holding onto the hope that nobody would believe such a hypothetical photograph was real, but even so, the governments might still think they had no choice but to declare war to suppress the Empire or face the prospect of Hell on Earth once the evidence started piling up.

We needed to end the war before it came to that so that I could safely decommission the most dangerous Projekte and arrange the peaceful and comfortable retirement of our supersoldiers (as well as my own, of course). Allowing the Untoten to hunt freely instead of deploying them only jointly with the Werwölfe could have done the trick (air superiority was invaluable in a modern war), but that wasn't possible at the moment. Because, as it turned out, even dread horrors were constrained by logistical issues, which I found weirdly reassuring.

Current storage methods only allowed for blood to be stored for a handful of days after it was taken. The researchers working on Projekt U had developed a magical formation that kept mage blood suitable for consumption by our vampires for weeks, which was how we'd been able to use them so extensively on the Northern front. That method hadn't even involved any Mythos-related lore, just normal, sane magical research. Unfortunately, using it on a single bottle of blood took far too long for it to be used by the Empire's medical corps, who I'm sure would have been delighted. Even in my old world, blood storage had been an issue that'd yet to be solved, requiring constant blood drives in order to meet demand (and that was in peacetime : countless propaganda posters across the cities of the Empire encouraged citizens to give blood to help the troops).

I didn't believe in karma beyond the simple truths that actions had consequences and that behaving like an asshole would result in other people striking back, but it would've been nice for Division Y to produce something indisputably beneficial to Mankind.

With the option of letting Visha's kindred loose denied to us, I had spent the last few hours thinking hard on what else in Division Y's arsenal could be used to bring the war to a swift conclusion, using Visha as a springing board. I had finally found something, and after a few express encoded telegrams with Central Headquarters, permission had been granted. The details of the plan still had to be ironed out with the rest of the Western Army, but in two weeks, Projekt V would arrive in the Rhine front.

And, with any luck, the war would end soon after.

Chapter End Notes

AN : I'm sure it will, Tanya. I'm sure it will.

Miracle of miracles, this chapter actually ended up shorter than the last one. I had planned a whole section of Tanya's monologue about the Werewolves VS Vampires debate back in her old world, but ended up cutting it : it just didn't fit anywhere. Also, I didn't want to spend two hours simulating a fight between an Untoten and a Werwolf, since it is unlikely to happen in the story.

The Werwölfe are Tagers from the TTRPG CthulhuTech, specifically the Phantom sub-type. You'll have to google what they look like, but keep in mind, in their setting of origin, those are the good guys. And not 40K Imperium-style "good guys" either : genuine, actual good guys, fighting evil cultists bent on ending the world. And the Phantom is perhaps the least disturbing Tager sub-type.

In my first draft, the Werwölfe were going to be Dhohanoids, which are the enemies of the Tagers in CthulhuTech and true servants of the Old Ones, wholly and completely evil. To quote the sourcebook, if the Tagers are humans who can turn into monsters, the Dhohanoids are monsters who can disguise as humans. I changed up things because I felt Tagers suited the story better.

(And yes, obviously there are rules to play an evil campaign with the player characters being Dhohanoids. To be honest, I am curious as to how you could run that kind of campaign without going parody-level of cartoonish evil to avoid being too disturbing.)

What is Projekt V ? I asked SB for suggestions on a tactical nuke equivalent, and after sorting through the veritable flood of responses, I finally found something which suited the story's needs. You'll have to wait a bit before learning the truth, however.

Well, that's all for now. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I look forward to your thoughts and suggestions for what comes next.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*May 2nd, 1925 – Parisee – Ministry of Defense*

Lieutenant-Colonel Severin Vianto, commander of the Francois Republic's Special Operations Army's Second Mage Wing, walked into the office of Vice Minister Pierre-Michel de Lugo after being allowed in by the two soldiers guarding the entrance. A grim mood hung over the entire Ministry, and it was evident in the appearance of the man sat at the desk in front of him.

The Vice Minister of Defense and the Armed Forces looked like he had aged ten years since the last time Vianto had seen him. His dress uniform, on which the insignia of a Major General (which had been the man's rank before his nomination to his current post in the Ministry) was wrinkled, his eyes were surrounded by deep circles, and there was a hint of grey in his mustache that hadn't been there before. Looking at the map on his desk, where the latest reports of the Rhine front were represented by colored pins showing the known positions of Republican and Imperial forces, it wasn't hard to guess what the cause of all of this was.

The last two weeks had been a nightmare for the Republic that all but made the previous months of grinding warfare look like a pleasant summer picnic. The new Imperial Wunderwaffe hadn't been as immediately devastating as the one used against the Dacian Army, nor had it immediately shifted the course of the war as it had at the Battle of the Osfjord. But the Devils of the Rhine, as they had so quickly come to be called by those who knew of their existence, were a force multiplier that the Republic simply had no counter to, especially when deployed alongside the Empire's mysterious mage-hunters.

The best theory their own experts had been capable of presenting regarding the Devils of the Rhine was that they were the product of decades of careful breeding of magically-altered chimeras, a branch of magical science that was only theoretically possible. Where the Hell the Empire had managed to hide such a hypothetical breeding facility that none of the other powers had ever heard of its existence before the war was unknown, but Vianto had to admit it was slightly more believable and slightly less worrying than the more frenzied theory that the Imperials had made alliance with the Devil himself.

So the suggestion to send exorcists and priests to the frontline had been rejected. For now.

Regardless of where the things had come from, their presence was undeniable. The Francois public had yet to learn about the Devils of the Rhine's existence, thank mostly to the sheer impossibility of them being real, but even the most stubborn of rear officers had been forced to confront the truth.

At first, some officers had suggested to wait for the Empire to over-extend and then launch flanking attacks to cut off the vanguard from their reinforcements and pounding them with

artillery until there wasn't even a single bloodstain left. The problem was, the Imperials were being very careful. They made sure to consolidate their gains before pushing again, and keep their line of reinforcement and retreat open.

Desperate plan after desperate plan had been implemented, with dismal results. Trenches had been mined and abandoned to the enemy before detonating the charges, only for the Devils to dig their way out of the rubble, howling with rage but looking none the worse for wear. Soldiers carrying flamethrowers had been concentrated in front of the Devils in the hope that fire would be more effective than bullets, only for the beasts to walk through the flames before ripping the soldiers to pieces, the burns they'd suffered already half-healed by the time the last of them died.

The most costly such gambit had been when the entire First Wing of Special Operations Army had been smuggled to the frontlines, refraining from using magic or doing anything that would reveal their presence before the Devils' nightly attack, when it was hoped their combined magical firepower could overwhelm the creatures' unnatural resilience. These had been good men, whom Vianto had been proud to call comrades-in-arms and even friends for some of them. And he was still convinced that the plan would've worked, if the other Imperial Wunderwaffe loose in the Rhine hadn't turned out to be even more dangerous than they had previously believed.

Not a single one had returned. Somehow, the mage-hunters had known exactly where they were hiding and had ripped apart their hiding places with explosives, before picking off the few who had survived the explosions without the benefit of their protective shells. Thirty-six of the Republic's most elite mages, lost in an instant and, as far as they'd been able to tell, without scoring a single kill in return.

Someone had even suggested they should shell their own trenches after ordering the soldiers to hold the Devils in place no matter what : the artillerists had told the officer in question to fuck off, though Vianto knew the possibility was still being considered.

The simple truth was, wherever Division Y was deployed, the Empire would win. And with every failed plan, the Republican Army's already tattered morale grew worse and worse. Casualties rate on the Rhine Front had always been ludicrously high compared to previous conflicts, but the latest figures showed a sharp increase, with the soldiers who died under Imperial bombardment during their flight from the Devils added to those killed by the monsters themselves. Before, losing several hundred sons of the Republic in a single day had been on the low end of casualties, but since the Devils' arrival, not a single day had gone by without at least a couple thousand losses.

At the rate things were going, the Army would collapse long before the Imperials reached Parisee, its soldiers no longer willing to sacrifice their lives in vain. And the attitude of the Rhine High Command wasn't exactly helping either. Besides their useless plans, they had also withdrawn entire squadrons of aerial mages from the front, assigning them to the protection of important facilities in the rear to guard against the possibility of nocturnal raids by the Imperial stealth mages. That might make sense from a strategic perspective, but all the grunts on the ground saw was desperately-needed reinforcements were pulled back to protect officers who had never visited the frontline in person.

The Republic had launched massed attacks on other sections of the frontlines (always under daylight), but the rest of the Imperial Army hadn't magically become incompetent with the arrival of Division Y's horrors. Some small gains had been made, but the casualties had been horrendous. Apparently, the rest of the Imperial troops were more than happy to let Division Y take point, while they focused on strengthening their own positions while the monsters drowned the mud in Francois blood.

Orders had been sent to the colonies to draft as many able-bodied men as possible into service and rush them through training to make up for the losses, but even rushed training still took time, as did transporting these new troops across the sea and up to the front. If nothing changed, the defeat of the Republic was inevitable.

Yes, *if nothing changed.*

"Lieutenant-Colonel Vianto, here as ordered, Vice Minister !" said Vianto with a sharp salute.

"Lieutenant-Colonel," De Lugo replied with a weary nod. "Thank you for coming so promptly. Take a seat, this is not a conversation we should have standing up."

While Vianto sat down, De Lugo pulled two glasses and a wine bottle out of his desk. After they had both taken a sip of their drink (Vianto noticed that his superior's had been a lot deeper than his own), the Vice Minister began :

"Three hours ago, I received a message from our friends in Albion." Despite everything, hearing such a high-ranking officer of the Republic speak that way of the nation's long-standing rival still felt strange to Vianto. "They managed to intercept a message to the Rhine sent to the local commanding officer of Division Y. In three days, another Wunderwaffe will be delivered by train to Arene. According to the Kingdom's spies, judging by the message's context, that weapon will break the front completely and help secure complete victory for the Empire."

Vianto had expected bad news, but this was worse than he could have imagined, and he was grateful De Lugo had asked him to sit before springing this on him. He took another fortifying sip of wine (it was a great one, really wasted in such circumstances), and struggled to find his voice :

"Can … can they really do that ?"

"They destroyed the Dacian Army in a single day," De Lugo reminded him. "While our forces are better equipped than the Grand Duchy's ever were, we have to assume it is within the capabilities of their accursed Wunderwaffen. However, this also represents an opportunity. The very first opportunity to strike a significant blow at Division Y."

Vianto hadn't risen to his current rank solely thanks to his magical prowess and social pedigree. He immediately saw where De Lugo was going.

"We know when that weapon will be delivered to Arene," he said slowly, "and that at least one representative of Division Y will be present."

"Exactly," confirmed the Major General. "Therefore, we'll be advancing the schedule of our special operation in Arene."

The Republic hadn't just been throwing lives away just to slow down the inevitable. Once the initial shock of the Empire's monsters had passed, they had realized they still had a shot at stopping the Imperial advance once and for all. Located in the contested territories the Empire had seized during its last war against the Republic, Arene still had many Francois sympathizers within its population. Now that the Imperial Army had made Arene into a logistical hub to supply its forces in the Rhine, the Republic had a unique opportunity to repeat what the Imperials had done to the Entente at the Osfjord.

If Arene could be liberated, then the Imperial lines would be cut off from resupply. Even just doing enough damage to the railway network would be enough to cripple the enemy logistics. However terrifying the Empire's Wunderwaffen were, they had only ever advanced in coordination with the rest of the Imperial Army. Losing Arene would force them to contract their lines or risk running out of ammo, food, fuel, and whatever the Wunderwaffen needed to keep slaughtering Republican soldiers. They would recover in time, but this should buy the Republic enough time for its allies across the pond to finally get off their arses and join the fray.

Also, the Empire was unlikely to deploy its Wunderwaffen in a city, and if they did, such an atrocity would turn the entire world against them. Vianto wasn't especially comfortable with what essentially amounted to using the civilians of Arene as a shield, but he was willing to bear the stain on his honor and participate in a lesser evil for the greater good of the Republic.

"Is the uprising ready to be activated ?" asked the Lieutenant-Colonel. "I thought our agents still needed a couple of weeks to smuggle in all the weapons and finish preparations."

De Lugo nodded gravelly. "It won't be as effective as we hoped, I know, but we have no choice. We will launch the operation on the day of the weapon's arrival. Assisting the brave patriots of Arene will unfortunately have to be your wing's secondary objective : your top priority will be neutralizing Division Y's assets. You'll strike during the day, so their damned mage-killers shouldn't be active. If you can …" De Lugo hesitated, then sighed before continuing, a disgusted expression on his face : "if you can and it is at all practical, try to recover the weapon in question for study. If not, destroy it."

"Study ?" repeated Vianto, aghast. "Vice Minister, are we really going to follow in the Empire's footsteps ?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it," growled De Lugo. "We are a righteous, God-fearing nation and we won't soil ourselves like this. But we need to know what we're up against."

Vianto was seasoned enough an officer to read between the lines. "The Allied Kingdom is pressuring us to try to acquire it, aren't they ?"

"Exactly," confirmed De Lugo, apparently too tired to play games. "They are very interested in the Empire's so-called superweapons, and the message they sent me is apparently the only result of their spying attempts on Division Y so far. Besides that, their own preparations to

join the war are still ongoing, and beyond the obvious advantages of learning more about the foe, they are looking for a just cause they can present to their population to justify going to war. The Empire has been very careful in toeing the line to avoid handing them an easy justification so far – one of the drawbacks of how well the Legadonian evacuation went."

De Lugo wouldn't say it out loud, of course, but the interests of the Republic would have been better served if the Empire had managed to corner the fleeing Legadonian fleet and politicians when they'd made render-vous with the Albish ships (which had just so happened to be performing 'training exercises' in the area) and caused an incident the Allied Kingdom could have used as a *casus belli.*

One might think deploying monsters on the frontlines would be enough, and indeed Vianto had heard more than one voice among the Republic command staff claiming as much. But such simple reasoning failed to take several things into account.

To start with, the only evidence of the Devils' existence was the original recording : they had been incredibly lucky that the fragile orb had survived battle, and no other record had been found since. While the Republicans knew it was genuine thanks to the testimony of the survivors who had faced the Devils themselves, the other powers were unlikely to take the words of obviously traumatized soldiers at face value, especially with such wild accusations. Illusion magic was difficult to identify on orbal recordings, especially damaged ones : it was all but certain the Republic would be accused of fabricating the whole thing wholesale.

Secondly, even if the existence of the Devils was proven beyond doubt, magic had become more and more widespread and accepted in the last few decades. The sheer potential of the computing orb had been recognized by most nations of the world, who had taken measures to quietly ensure the lingering prejudices against magic that remained from the great Inquisitorial purges of the Dark Ages were pushed back. Yes, the Devils were horrifying, but then so was war in general, especially in its current industrial incarnation in the Rhine. Crying foul about the enemy's weapons being too effective would only be seen as the whining of a loser. And despite De Lugo's assurances, Vianto knew the other powers would be eager to acquire the Wunderwaffen for their own armed forces. The higher one went into politics, the more pragmatism replaced idealism, after all.

(Of course, the Republic officers on the frontline weren't telling that to the soldiers under their command. Instead, they made sure to denounce the Empire's use of infernal sorcery, in the hope that religious fervor would help the troops overcome their terror and follow their orders.)

And then, finally, there was the simple fact that using the Devils didn't break any of the laws of war. There were many, many precedents to using animals in war (the horse being the first one to come to mind, even if their use was being faded out as warfare became more and more mechanized), and those were often bred over the course of generations for maximum efficiency. And that was if the Devils were animals at all : the soldiers who had seen them fight swore they were sentient creatures. Morally abhorrent as the thought was, there was no international ban on using such … supersoldiers, Vianto guessed would be the word. That was because nobody else had ever made them, of course, but the diplomats and international lawyers wouldn't care much about that.

As a result, any intelligence the Republic could gain on Division Y would be a priceless bargaining chip as well as a strategic asset. Presented in the right way, it might be enough to convince the Albish public to support joining the war. Coupled with the importance of Arene to Imperial logistics, this made the upcoming operation all the more vital.

"I won't fail you, General," Vianto promised his superior. De Lugo nodded soberly.

"I know you won't. Remember, Lieutenant-Colonel : the fate of the Republic rests on your shoulders and those of your men. If you fail, the very best case scenario will see Francois reduced to little more than a client-state of the Allied Kingdom for years as we pay back our debts to them."

De Lugo didn't elaborate on the worst case scenario was, for which Vianto was grateful. Given what they already knew of Division Y's work, there was no point in tempting fate.

---

*May 3rd, 1925 – Parisee – Cathedral of Our Beloved Lady*

When he'd left the Vice Minister's office, Vianto had expected to spend the days leading to the Liberation of Arene preparing for it, drilling his men and studying the maps of the city they had available until the last moment. He had not expected to find himself kneeling inside what many considered the greatest and most holiest cathedral in all of Francois, along with the rest of his Wing's First Squadron. And yet, here they were, twelve of the Republic's most dangerous soldiers prostrating themselves before the icon that filled the back wall of the building.

The day before, only a few moments after his meeting with De Lugo, the Archbishop of Parisee, Baptiste Beauvais, had asked Vianto for a private meeting, citing urgent concerns as to the safety of the Republic. Vianto, who had thought he could certainly use a priest's advice before going to Arene, had agreed. To his shock, the Archbishop had told him that he knew of his upcoming mission, having received a vision from the Lord warning him that, without help, Vianto and his men were doomed to failure and death. Only with the blessing of the Lord could they hope to accomplish their mission, and save Francois from the vile heresies that had grown within the Empire without anyone realizing.

If not for the detailed knowledge of the operation possessed by the Archbishop, which were known only to a handful of people, Vincent would have ignored him. But combined with the images he had seen of the Devils of the Rhine, suddenly the prospect of the Lord taking a direct interest in the Great War hadn't seemed so far-fetched. And so here he was with the rest of his Wing's 1st Squadron, ready to receive the Archbishop's blessing before departing on their mission to Arene.

If nothing else, the Lieutenant-Colonel mused, his unit certainly could use the boost to morale. Part of the briefing for the operation had included seeing the record of the first Imperial breakthrough. Added to the knowledge that the stealth mage-hunters of the Empire were active on the Rhine front, it honestly was humbling that none of the men had protested their orders.

"You twelve have been chosen to bear the light of the Lord into battle, but be warned. The blessing of God is not for the weak of spirit," warned the Archbishop as he advanced toward the line of kneeling mages, all of them in uniform. "Even the greatest of us are but flawed mortals, while He is perfection incarnate. Fill your mind with that which you hold most dear. Focus on the sacred duty that has been bestowed upon you. Hold it close to your heart, and let His light fill you with His strength."

Vianto closed his eyes, and thought on the orders he had received. But no, those weren't important enough. He thought of the oaths he had sworn as a soldier of the Republic, but those weren't enough either. Instead, he focused on the purpose behind the orders, on the spirit behind the words of his vows.

*I will protect Francois,* he swore to himself as the Archbishop began the ritual of benediction.

He repeated the mantra to himself over and over as the priest applied sacred oils to his forehead and spoke words that had not been spoken in more than ten centuries.

*I will protect Francois. I will protect Francois. I will protect Francois.*

Conviction and determination filled him, and along with them came something else, something that seeped into his body and soul and crystallized around the very core of his being.

*I will protect Francois.*

*Come hell or high water, come all the hosts of Hell …*

*Whatever foulness threatens this land,* **I shall destroy it.**

---

*May 4th, 1925 – Imperial City Arene – Train Station*

All in all, I had not exactly been impressed with the Francois response to our combined mystical arms approach so far. They had succeeded in slowing the Empire's advance, yes, but the cost in human lives was abhorrent. I hadn't been surprised when I had been told summary executions for insubordination were apparently on the rise in the Francois army, as young men understandably objected to recklessly throwing their lives away in suicidal charges. Really, I would have expected tactics like this from the Red Army, with its infamous political officers and enforced fanatical devotion to communism, not the comparatively civilized Francois forces.

I had considered splitting the Werwölfe into two teams in response, one advancing at night and the other helping hold the ground during the day. I didn't care how scary the Francois officers were, the Werwölfe were scarier, and with the technology of the era all human wave tactics would accomplish against them was getting a lot of Francois killed. But during the day, they would be without the support of the Untoten. Sure, the Empire had plenty of other air support I could call on, but none of them were on Projekt U's level when it came to sweeping the skies clear of enemy mages, and enemy mages were what I was worried about.

The regeneration of a Werwolf didn't work if they were killed instantly, and a high-powered spell to the skull might just do the trick.

Besides, it wasn't as if the Imperial Army really needed the help. Sure, they had been forced to give ground several times, and the damage had forced us to delay further advance as we restored communication lines with the rear, but the Western Army had been fighting on the Rhine for months at this point. They knew what they were doing and could kill the Francois just as well without the Werwölfe holding their hand in their claws.

Really, at this point, deploying Projekt V felt like a moral imperative as well as a strategic one. It would save lives in the long run, and the people it would kill were really asking for it with their callous disregard for the lives of their countrymen. War was inherently wasteful, yes, but what they were doing was appalling. Any reasonable person would have sued for peace by now.

But, as I had been forced to face time and again, people were rarely reasonable. And so here I was, at the Arene train station, waiting for the delivery of the weapon that would hopefully end this whole morbid farce once and for all. Visha was with me, her uniform completely protecting her from the sun's deadly rays. The rest of the Untoten were at rest outside the city, along with the Werwölfe.

The train was on time, of course. Since the fall of Legadonia had allowed the Empire to focus its resources on the Western Front, Arene had become a center of Imperial logistics, its rail network allowing to bring in men and supplies close to the front much more efficiently. I looked at the clock as it came to a stop, and smiled at the display of human ingenuity.

Men began to descend from the train, met by local personnel, and the unloading started. Visha and I walked toward a wagon that was conspicuously left alone. I greeted the squad of soldiers who had been sent along with the wagon by name, recognizing each of them from Castle Schwartzstein. Division Y didn't have many true, ordinary soldiers assigned to it, but they were a vital part of our operations all the same, being some of the few people working under me whose judgment and common sense I could trust. After checking that everything had gone well, I gave them permission to go on leave in the city : having spent the entire trip on high alert, they certainly deserved to relax with a beer or two.

Once they were gone, I returned my attention to the wagon itself. Visha opened it, revealing a massive metal box that was only slightly smaller than the wagon containing it, and held in place during transit by thick metal chains that we removed using the keys the escort had handed over before their departure.

The box was heavily reinforced, and it was only the second layer of protection around Projekt V (the wagon itself being the first). The actual Wunderwaffe was much, much smaller, but given its destructive potential I had erred on the side of caution when transporting it. For instance, the lock of the second layer could only be opened with a specific key, only two of which existed : one in Castle Schwartzstein, and the other kept in my possession precisely for times such as these. I reached to take it out, and stopped, my hand half-way to my neck. What was that mana signature -

The outer wall of the train station exploded in a shower of stone and glass shards. Screams of shock and pain filled the vast space where several railways ended.

My brain froze. Despite all that I'd seen since starting my work with Division Y, my mind refused to accept what I was seeing.

It was an angel, or at least a very convincing cosplay of one. Two wings of bright light stretched from his back. He wore some kind of elaborate plate armor that wouldn't have looked out of place in one of the video games of my previous life's homeland, gleaming scarlet and blue in the light of the midday sun. His face was of the kind I'd have expected to see on paintings in some nobleman's house, and his eyes burned brightly gold. In his right hand, he held a jousting lance that sparked with magical energy – and what magical energy it was. To my senses, it blazed like a caged sun. The only times I had felt something more powerful had been during certain experiments in Castle Schwartzstein, none of which had ever been repeated or would be as long as I was in command of Division Y.

**"Imperial witch,"** the angel declared, his voice booming across the station and raising the hackles on my back. **"Despair, for the hour of your judgment has come. Today is the day the Empire's evil is brought low by the sword of righteousness !"**

As he spoke, I saw other shapes moving through the air behind him, and dimly sensed their mana signatures, small as they felt compared to the angel's own. Then, with my vision augmented by a quick spell, I caught a glimpse of a plane, and the pieces fell into place. The Republic had air-dropped aerial mages on Arene in order to try and replicate what we had done at the Osfjord. It was a cunning move, and I would have appreciated the craftsmanship if not for the fact that I could also hear non-magical gunshots, panicked screams, and what sounded distinctly like an armed mob doing what armed mobs had done since the human race had started to live together in numbers sufficient for group-think to swallow individual reason.

This wasn't just a strike on the railway hub on which the Empire's frontline logistics depended, bad enough as that would have been. This was a full-on partisan uprising, and I refused to believe it happening right when I was in the city was a coincidence. Not when the pseudo-angel hovering above me radiated far too much power for it to be natural, unless the Francois had been practicing magical eugenics for the last couple of centuries without anyone noticing.

… Wait. Was this Being X's work ? After using me to create monsters meant to inspire terror, was he sending champions to defeat us and promote his creed of unquestioned religious obedience ? The thought of such manipulative tactics made me sick to my stomach. At least part of the reason I'd been so very careful while leading Division Y had been to spite that would-be god, but it seemed he had other strings to his bow.

"You bring war in the middle of a city full of civilians, and you've the gall to call us evil ?" I answered his accusation, keeping my thoughts from showing on my face.

Seeing that the newcomer's attention was on me, the rest of the Imperial personnel in the station wisely got out of the way. I was slightly annoyed at how quickly they left, but it wasn't as if they would have been any help anyway.

**"The people of Arene have seen through the lies of the Empire,"** he proclaimed. **"Even now, they rise up against your unjust oppression to reclaim their freedom !"**

"You gave guns to a bunch of undisciplined malcontents in an enemy city to try and cause problems in order to compensate for your generals' strategic failures," I sneered. "Don't try to paint this as some kind of righteous act. The international courts certainly won't."

**"Your thoughts truly are as twisted as the monsters you surround yourself with, witch, that you would think the world would ever stand with you against the forces of true justice,"** the 'angel' droned on. **"Did you truly think your heresy would go unpunished ? Know that I am Severin Vianto, First of the Francois Holy Knights ! In the name of the Lord, I shall strike you down !"**

He charged straight at me, spear held high, going from immobile to full speed so suddenly I was briefly caught by surprise – some part of me had expected something with that kind of heavy armor to need more time to reach such speed. Fortunately, I hadn't come to Arene alone. Visha slammed into my side, pushing me out of the way, before twisting in the air with all the preternatural speed of the Untoten and the blatant disregard of momentum conservation allowed by their flight ability once properly mastered.

She barely managed to avoid being skewered herself, but the shaft of the spear still caught her on the backhand, with enough force to send her crashing through the nearest wall. I felt a spike of worry : the Untoten's uniform was as tough as we'd been able to make it while remaining practical, but it had limits. And with the sun shining brightly outside, a single tear and she'd have to abandon the field, leaving me completely alone. As we had found out in the early stages of the Projekt, the flesh of the Untoten would start to burn the moment it was exposed to sunlight, resulting in the complete destruction of the affected part within moments. They could regenerate from that with enough blood, but the process took weeks on the equivalent of the diet we'd fed them during the Northern push.

I made a snap decision. "Visha, go ! Get the others, call for reinforcements, and clean the airspace of the rest of these morons !"

"But, Major !" she protested, her voice muzzled by pain and her gas mask as she rose from the debris of her impact.

"That's an order ! GO !"

This time, she obeyed, vanishing from sight in the blink of an eye. Sending my bodyguard away while I was under attack might seem like a rash move, and it probably was. My reasoning was that there was little Visha could do alone against this monster, but with the rest of the supersoldiers stationed outside the city, she should be able to keep this whole debacle from escalating into a full-blown disaster. It would take some time for them to get here, but the partisan uprising the Francois had concocted shouldn't be able to do any real damage to the Imperial war effort in so short a time. As long as the pseudo-angel was dealt with, the rebellion would be over the moment the sun set.

Was it the correct move ? Maybe, maybe not. In the heat of battle, you had to go with your guts, because taking time to carefully think things through would get you killed. The whole

point of training was to give you the correct set of instincts. Or, if not the correct one, then the one your superiors approved of, which hopefully would also help you survive a bit longer on the frontline.

My own instincts saved my life as the so-called 'Holy Knight' pointed his lance at me and I sensed a tremendous amount of energy gathering at its tip. I had the measure of his speed now, and hurled myself away just in time, but even moving out of the way and with my barrier spell cranked up to maximum power, I still felt the heat of the blow scorching my exposed skin. The sight of what the attack had done, however, was almost enough to make me forget the pain of the burns.

The attack had burned a hole through at least three civilian homes after it had missed me, and I could see a couple more starting to catch fire. That fanatic had unleashed the equivalent of an artillery shell in the middle of a crowded city, and one he claimed to be here to liberate to boot !

"That's one more war crime to add to your starting a battle in the middle of thousands of civilians," I called out to him, trying to play for time while I wracked my brain for a plan that didn't rely on my most desperate contingency. "Are the people of Arene aware that their would-be liberators are willing to set their beautiful city ablaze ?"

**"Their sacrifices will be remembered, and God shall welcome them in His embrace as martyrs,"** he answered, utterly unconcerned. **"We, the chosen instruments of His wrath, shall bring an end to your evil, witch !"**

The sheer self-righteousness of his words made me furious. How the hell was I supposed to convince my superiors to open peace talks before we accidentally destroyed the world, if the other combatants were unwilling to see reason and determined to fight to the very last ?!

No, that was a question for later. Right now, I had to survive, and to do that, I had to kill the enemy in front of me.

Thankfully, I wasn't exactly without experience fighting monsters with weird superpowers. I had personally led the training of the Untoten and Werwölfe, knowing that their prowess would reflect on me as their superior, and I had been forced to take action several times when one of my subordinates' experiments had gone off the rails in spite of all the precautions I forced them to take. I was also carrying a top-of-the-line computing orb, which had been enhanced by some of our more traditionally-minded magical engineers (we were still far from the frankly terrifying prospect of a Mythos-based orb, but the research notes sent to us by Brigadier General Zettour had shown a few relatively easy improvements). My mana was in the upper limits of what was possible for a human mage, and I had experimented with a few spell formulas the Denkmaschine had patched together but that had never been used in real battle conditions.

It was going to be hard, but I was confident I could beat that moron who kept talking on the battlefield.

Of course, just as I convinced myself of that, eleven others just like him, except with slightly less ornate armor and power, descended from the skies, completely surrounding me and

laying waste to this entire section of the station. Their mana signatures were so near to identical that, with my senses blurred by the sheer intensity of the first one's aura, I had completely missed them until now.

Well, Scheiße. There was no way I could take them all head-on, or even flee and hope to escape or survive long enough for someone to come to my aid.

Clearly, Vianto realized that as well, because he spoke to me again :

**"Do you see ? Your defeat is assured. But the Lord is ever merciful, even unto those such as you, who spat in His face. Kneel before the Throne of God. Submit to His judgment and accept His Grace within your wicked heart, and you may yet be saved !"**

Oh, that bastard had not just said that. I saw red, all caution vanishing from my mind.

"I am Tanya Degurechaff, little knight, and I. DO. NOT. KNEEL !"

As I roared (or, well, shouted : my tiny body wasn't exactly capable of something anyone would call a roar), I pulled out a thin metal tube out of my jacket's inner pocket.

I hadn't wanted to resort to this, and not just because it was untested and the description the Denkmaschine had given along with the instructions to create that serum had been both worryingly vague and dreadfully ominous. I had brought it here in a fit of paranoia, both because I didn't trust the madmen not to do something stupid with it in my absence (its effects were supposed to be temporary, but that didn't mean someone couldn't do a lot of damage during that time, especially with all the dangerous stuff we kept under lock and key at our headquarters), and to serve as insurance in case things went very, very wrong.

Fine. Being X and his puppets had left me no choice. Whatever happened next, it would be on them, not me.

Before my common sense could catch up with me and stop me, I braced myself, flicked the security cap off, jabbed the needle into my throat, and pushed the injector.

The pain of the small stab was nothing compared to what came next.

---

*"We had been told there would be mage reinforcements dispatched from the Republic to help the Liberation, yes, and that the whole thing needed to be rushed because the Imperials were slaughtering our brothers in the trenches with some kind of infernal monsters. But we had no idea we would get aid from angels. When we saw them descend from the skies, it was incredible. I truly felt that we had been blessed by God and were doing His work. All doubts and hesitation vanished from my mind.*

*My friends and I were deployed near the train station, with orders to keep the Imperial law enforcement from reaching it. The big angel went right for the train station while the others stayed in the air and the aerial mages scattered across the city to provide support, just like we had been told they would. Me and the boys took out our weapons and moved to block the entrance, and we got into a fight with a group of policemen. And just as we were knocking the*

*last of them out, we heard an explosion from the station. We turned, and saw the other angels come down. I remember thinking that they must be fighting some kind of Imperial devil, like we'd heard there were in the trenches. And ... that's when it happened.*

*All of a sudden, the sky went dark. We all looked up, and we saw it. It was A moon, but it wasn't THE moon, if that makes sense. It was the wrong color, for one, but the patterns on its surface weren't right either. And I've never seen an eclipse in my life, but I doubt they are anything like that. Yes, it blocked out the sun, but we could all still see perfectly fine. Everything was just ... gray. Colorless. Except the blood, I remember that clearly. The blood was still just as red as ever.*

*We could still other stars in the darkened sky. Except, I know what the night sky above Arene looks like, and the stars were all wrong.*

*Silence fell on Arene as everyone took in what had just happened. Then there was fire and thunder, and screams came out of the train station, horrible ones that I somehow knew where the angels'. I hadn't thought that it was possible for angels to scream in agony. I never want to hear that sound again in my life. It shocked everyone back into motion, and there were more screams, human ones this time, rising from all across the city in a symphony of panic and terror.*

*I saw six angels emerge from the hole in the front of the station, and it was clear that they were fleeing. For a moment we all stood still, unable to understand how these divine warriors could possibly be running. Then she emerged from the station in pursuit, and we all immediately understood.*

*When I was a kid, my parents took me out to the countryside to visit my grandparents, and I went stargazing one night. Far from the city, without all the lights, you can really see all the stars in the sky, you know ? It's really beautiful, but I don't think I'll ever be able to look at it the same way again.*

*She was like if someone had cut off a piece of that star-filled night sky and made it into a human figure. She was half as tall again as the angels she battled, and flew without wings. Seeing mages fly has always seemed weird to me, but when she did it it seemed completely natural, as if gravity had no right to hold her down.*

*We couldn't take our eyes off her. She pursued the angels across Arene, ignoring the fire they hurled at her. Whenever one of their shots missed, it would slam into a building and destroy it, but they didn't care.*

*I felt so small. How could anything I did matter when such powers were battling right next to me ?*

*Just a moment ago, I had been fighting for the freedom of Arene from Imperial oppression, for the glory of the Republic. But when I saw that, it all felt insignificant. Meaningless. The sensation of glory and patriotism was gone, and all that was left was the blood we had spilled, the buildings around us set ablaze by the careless fire of angels, and the screams of the wounded and dying.*

*I dropped my weapons and fell to the ground, unable to move, to act, to think. Most of my comrades did the same. Those who didn't went to help with the fires, all thoughts of liberation gone.*

*I am ashamed of many of the things I did that day. But most of all, I'm ashamed I didn't have their strength."*

Extract from the interrogation of Martin Girault, Arene citizen and member of the FLA (*Front de la Libération d'Arene*) partisan group, recorded in custody of the Imperial Army following the events of the Eclipsed Liberation.

---

*"We were deceived, my friends. We spilled blood in the name of false idols, and told ourselves that this was just because our victims were Imperials. As if such petty things as mortal borders matter in the eyes of the Heavens ! And when the winged warriors came, we saw it as yet more proof of the righteousness of our cause, for they were magnificent and powerful.*

*But is it not written that, when the true celestial messengers came to bring word to Man, they did so in a most fearsome form ? What we think of as angels today, brothers and sisters, men and women with wings and flaming swords, is but the construct of our feeble minds struggling to recast the divine into something more familiar.*

*The Republic sought to deceive us by sending false angels, wrought in the image our ignorant forebears had of the heavenly envoys. But the true chosen apostle of the Celestial Truth was ready for them, oh yes !*

*I saw it with my own eyes, on the very steps of Kalerian Cathedral, like so many of you. I saw the Lady of Stars as she brought the leader of the false angels low at last, after hunting him and his cohorts throughout the city. I heard her voice, booming like thunder as she denounced him as the puppet of a pretender godling, all under the pale radiance of the fey moon and sky that had covered Arene upon her arrival. I saw the imposter writhe under her heel, and lash out with fire that let her unharmed but burned scores of innocents until, in her rage at his callous cruelty, she broke his lance and ended his existence so that he would hurt no one else. I saw the remaining pretenders flee from her wrath, the lie of their glory laid bare for all to witness.*

*And I saw the Imperial soldiers, who mere moments ago had been fighting for their lives against the fools waylaid by Francois deceit, direct their efforts to suppressing the fires set by the ruthless invaders. I saw us all come together to help one another, our differences washed away by the realization of our common nature in the face of the Lady's power, even as she vanished within the Kalerian Cathedral and the sun and skies returned to what they had been. And I wept, as you did, overcome with grief and joy and wonder all at once.*

*For years now, the Imperial scientists have been rightly proud of their pursuit of the world's mysteries. What better way is there to honor the beauty and wonders of the universe than by learning more about them ? It is not through blind obedience to foolish notions of patriotism and bestial slaughter of our fellow man that we shall reach the heavens. That path leads only to the hell that is war, and which so nearly consumed our beloved city. Only through the*

*pursuit of reason and the contemplation of the divine truths revealed to us through the use of our god-given intellects may that be accomplished !*

*The Great War, which is great only in its horror, has distracted us from what really matters. It has poisoned our hearts and turned us against one another and away from the most simple and obvious truths ! Is not 'Love Thy Neighbour' one of the guidelines that were given to us so that we may find our way through this life ? And yet, the Republic dares to claim to be blessed by the Heavens, when it was the one who declared war first, creating the nightmare that is the Rhine front, where young men die by the tens of thousands !*

*We who have been blessed with this glimpse of the divine must make sure the lesson isn't forgotten. We must come together and ensure that, within our walls at least, peace and harmony reign, not hatred and discord. Only then will we be able to walk the Path of Stars toward illumination ..."*

Excerpt from an anonymous pamphlet found across Arene following the Eclipsed Liberation, titled 'The Path of Stars'.

Chapter End Notes

AN : This story just keeps going ! Do not expect that kind of writing speed to continue for long. I still have no idea what foul bargains my readers have made that make the muse so enthusiastic about this story, but I live in dread of the creative backlash that surely must come at some point.

I got a lot of suggestions on SB when I asked for help with the Francois response to the deployment of Projekte U and W on the Rhine front. I used some of the ideas in this chapter, though far from all of them. Some might even have worked, and I couldn't have that, but this is WW1-era-style generals we are talking about.

No Arene Massacre this time. I find it deeply amusing that giving Tanya access to eldritch horrors has, in fact, resulted in LESS civilian casualties than in canon. There is a lesson in there somewhere about the inherent evil of war, man's inhumanity to man, and the unnerving similarities between Mythos-induced insanity and fanatical nationalism, I am sure. But since this is at the very least supposed to be a parody story and I am writing it by the seat of my pants (a new experience that I'm finding very enjoyable), I'm not going to think too hard about that.

After asking my readers on SB (yes, I do that a lot, it's probably part of why I update this story so fast), I decided that, in this story at least, Arene used to be a Republican city that was captured by the Empire in a previous conflict between the Empire and the Republic, hence why there are partisans in it and why the territories around it are "contested" (which fits with the history of the Alsace-Lorraine region in our own history). Given that the Empire is supposed to have just finally pushed back the Republic's initial push back to the border, the idea that they captured Arene during the

Great War didn't fit in my mental picture of how things, and I couldn't find a definitive answer in the source material.

The Holy Knights were inspired by the Order's research in Devil May Cry 4, and the Heaven's Ward Knights from Final Fantasy XIV. You didn't think Being X was going to stay out of the story indefinitely, did you ? I saw a lot of speculation on what he was doing after Tanya started working with Division Y, and whether or not he is truly the one behind her unexpected success. Reading all those theories was very interesting and helped me flesh out the crossover's cosmology, so keep speculating !

Meanwhile, Tanya's own transformation was inspired by the upcoming (unless Wizards of the Coast decide to do something even more stupid than they already did recently) book Steinhardt's Guide to the Eldritch Hunt, which I have pre-commanded and gotten access to the preview materials of. I needed something for the [Mythos serum that gives Tanya superpowers] placeholder in my notes, and inspiration struck while perusing it. While putting the finishing touches on this chapter, it also helped with another placeholder much later in my story notes, so that's already money well spent, especially given the incredible artwork and tantalizing lore. It really feels like reading a Bloodborne TTRPG.

The next chapter will contain the aftermath and fallout of the Eclipsed Liberation, and a POV you have all been waiting for. As always, I look forward to your reactions to this chapter and ideas for what comes next.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*VILE FRANCOIS PLOT THWARTED IN ARENE !*

*Yesterday, our war against the Francois Republic, which our ancient enemy started out of petty fear and naked greed, reached a new unprecedented low.*

*Our more academically-minded readers will no doubt know that the city of Arene hasn't always rested within the borders of our Empire. Up until the previous conflict between the Reich and the Francois Republic, Arene belonged to the latter, but was granted to the Empire along with its surrounding territories as part of the peace treaty both countries signed and swore to abide by.*

*But as the Republic already proved with its cowardly, unprovoked attack in the Rhine, its leaders regard such things as treaties as little more than suggestions. And, it seems, even the international laws seeking to restrict warfare in order to minimize its inevitable human cost aren't sacred to the opportunistic, war-mongering commanders of the Francois Army.*

*According to this journalist's sources in the Imperial Army, yesterday afternoon, Francois aerial mages attempted an attack on the complex railway hub through which so much of the supplies our troops on the Rhine front need pass. That much could be seen as mere good tactics, for to strike at the enemy logistics has long been part of the art of war. But that wasn't all, oh no !*

*In a move of breathtaking callousness, the Republic manipulated the people of Arene, men without even the most basic military training, to take up arms and rise in insurrection against the Empire. Needless to say, the use of such irregular combatants is a gross violation of the laws of war, to say nothing of the fact the Republic clearly sought to use the people of Arene as human shields, relying on the Empire's unwillingness to attack a city full of civilians, only a portion of whose had joined the uprising.*

*One can all too easily imagine the cold, monstrous calculation that went through the minds of Francois high command. Either the Empire did nothing, and our troops would be starved of food and ammo and be promptly crushed or forced to withdraw, leaving the industrial heartland of our nation defenceless, or we would move in force to retake Arene, and they would cry out to the other powers about our violent response, nevermind the fact that they orchestrated it all ! Truly, the hypocrisy of the Republican generals knows no bound.*

*The situation could easily have escalated into such a bloodbath, but thankfully this was not to be. Though the exact details are yet obscure and an investigation is ongoing, we know that the aerial mages dispatched by the Republic to enact this criminal scheme were defeated by Imperial elite soldiers travelling through the very railway hub they aimed to destroy.*

*Yet even in defeat, these so-called liberators lashed out against the very city they claimed to be here to save, setting entire buildings ablaze with their reckless use of destructive spells before finally being brought down or fleeing in disgrace. At the sight of this wanton destruction, the partisans they had incited were shocked out of their bloodlust, and laid down their arms to assist in saving the city they loved so much they were willing to kill and die for it from the flames.*

*At the time of publishing, Arene is still on lock down, with few communications in and out being allowed while the Imperial Army Logistics corps work to rebuild the damage inflicted on the railway hub as well as suppressing the fires and handling the flow of wounded civilians.*

*What this unconscionable acts will mean for the recent string of victories won by the Imperial Army on the Rhine front, as well as for the future of Arene, is unclear at the moment. We have reached out to one of the history experts of the Berun Institute ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, May 5th, 1925

---

*CRUEL IMPERIAL OPPRESSION IN ARENE ESCALATES !*

*Ever since our beloved Republic declared its war of liberation to thwart the expansionist ambitions of the Empire, one of its stated goals has been the liberation of the lands that were unjustly torn from its embrace the last time Republican and Imperial armies clashed on the field of battle.*

*Within these lands stands the city of Arene, and despite decades of oppression, its inhabitants still remember their roots. They have kept their Francois heritage alive, defiantly continuing to proudly wear the culture of their blood in the open, and rejecting the subversive efforts of their conquerors. For this, the people of Arene have suffered, as the Empire cannot tolerate dissent within its borders; yet still the people of Arene endured, waiting for the right time.*

*That time, it seemed, was yesterday, when like our ancestors once did they bravely took up arms to claim their freedom from tyranny. They made no secret of their intentions, broadcasting their call for revolution across all frequencies using radios seized from the Imperial oppressor. The streets of Arene were full of men, women and children rising up in the name of freedom. In the trenches of the Rhine, our valiant soldiers took heart as Arene's cry reached them, their faith that the flame of the Republic's greatness can never be extinguished renewed once more.*

*Alas, it was not to be. Less than an hour after the song of defiance had begun, it was silenced in steel, blood and fire. All civilian radio transmissions from Arene have fallen silent, and one shudders to imagine the unspeakable acts that surely the denizens must be subjected to in the hands of the Imperial state police, now given a pretext to unleash the full range of its cruelty upon its recalcitrant subjects.*

*Yet even with the imposed blackout on communications and armed guards stationed around the city, no doubt with orders to shoot anyone trying to escape, the Imperial warmachine still couldn't conceal the plumes of smoke rising from Arene, testament to the violence visited*

*upon the city. It is not difficult to imagine what happened : how, when faced with the prospect of losing one of the Kaiser's prizes, the Imperial Army unleashed their killers upon the city. No amount of Republican fervor, after all, can help someone armed only with his courage stand up to an aerial mage raining death from above. How many civilians did the Empire ruthlessly slaughter before the rest were forced to submit to protect their loved ones ? God only knows, I am afraid.*

*This outrage cannot stand, and will not stand. The Empire has shown its true face once more, and all civilized nations must come together to put an end to its atrocities once and for all. Only when the Republican flag flies over Berun and the Kaiser's armies have been crushed will peace return to a continent freed of the threat of Imperial expansion and oppression, the two facets of the same coin that, yesterday, fell upon Arene like the Devil's own cruel hammer.*

*Earlier this week, Councilor-in-exile Abensoll expressed his worry for the people of Legadonia, who were left defenceless after their soldiers were forced to leave their fatherland behind to continue the fight abroad, their exemplary valor and courage no longer enough to balance the Empire's devilish warmachine. And now that we know the Imperials are willing to set fire to cities that refuse to submit, what horrors await the people of Legadonia who were unable to flee ahead of the Empire's merciless advance ?*

*In this dark hour, we must redouble our support to the war effort. Recruitment stations are still open, and for those unable to participate directly in the protection of the Republic, buying war bonds remains possible …*

Excerpt from the front-page of *La Flamme de Parisée*, May 5th, 1925

---

*May 6th, 1925 – Imperial City Arene*

Colonel Eric von Lergen did his best to conceal his nerves as he descended from the military train into the still-rebuilding train station. Construction crews were hard at work all around him, replacing damaged track sections and rebuilding the various elements of the station that had been damaged during the battle three days prior.

A young man in a standard Imperial uniform with a Lieutenant's insignia saluted him. At first glance, there was nothing that distinguished him from any of the hundreds of young recruits Lergen had seen in recent years, yet the Colonel still felt a shiver of unease as he approached – there was something … wild about the young man, a sense of restrained power and violence simmering just below the surface.

"Colonel Lergen," the blond man greeted him. "Welcome to Arene. If you'll follow me, your car is waiting to bring you to the Major."

"Thank you, Lieutenant … ?"

"Warren Grantz, sir. I'm part of Unit W under the Major."

Unit W. Projekt W. *Werwolf*. Oh, joy. He was going to be driven around by one of the shape-shifting supersoldiers responsible for their unprecedented success on the Rhine Front of late.

If he remembered their spec sheet correctly, and he did, then the man in front of him was capable of tearing a tank apart with his bare hands when in his battle form.

"Then let us be on our way, Lieutenant Grantz," he said, showing none of the discomfort he felt.

"Yes, sir. By the way, the Major apologizes for not coming to welcome you in person, but she's still recovering from the battle."

Lergen frowned at that. "Was she injured ? There was nothing about that in her preliminary report." Of course, that report had been frustratingly light on details, which given that the Republic had clearly known where and when to find her Lergen could hardly blame her for.

"Not … *injured*, per say. But she definitely isn't in a state to stroll around the city. You'll see for yourself soon."

As they drove through the city, Lergen watched through the car's window. If he had to described Arene in one word, it would be 'quiet'. Far quieter than he'd expected it to be, in fact. If not for the traces of the battle they passed by (cordoned off sections of the road that were damaged, the burned-out husks of buildings, and other, subtler signs), they could have been in any other city the Colonel had visited in his career, rather than one that had been the site of a partisan uprising and a fierce magical battle only two days ago.

There was a crowd gathered around the Kalerian Cathedral, and Grantz parked some distance away. The crowd wasn't hostile, nor was it praying as Lergen would've expected it. Instead, this reminded Lergen of the memorial ceremonies he had attended, mixed with a somewhat festive mood. Several open kitchens had been opened, and people were passing out bowls of food as well as carrying them inside the cathedral itself.

Others were painting night skies reigned over by a moon that seemed somehow wrong to Lergen, with a surprising amount of skill given that their clothings indicated none of them were likely to work in an artistic profession. The snippets of conversation Lergen could hear (the locals spoke both Imperial and Francois, but the Colonel was fluent in both) often mentioned someone or something called the 'Lady of Stars'. He also heard several complain about the war, which was common enough, but more surprisingly the people here seemed to be blaming the Republic for starting it.

Also surprisingly, the people of Arene didn't send any angry looks at the two men in uniform walking among them. Lergen knew that anti-Imperial sentiment had been quite strong in the city, but even the most loyalist of Imperial towns could've been forgiven for some degree of resentment after a battle had been fought inside its walls. Instead, the citizens looked upon the two officers with a respect that wouldn't have been out of place in Berun itself.

A few pairs of soldier carrying rifles of a strange design Lergen had never seen before were stationed around the Cathedral, keeping watch on the crowd for any sign of violence. Judging by the nod of greeting Lieutenant Grantz sent in their direction and their curious gear, they were probably Division Y personnel, dispatched to Arene alongside the Wunderwaffe the Major had requested permission to deploy. Given that their usual posting would be Castle

Schwartzstein itself, Lergen could only imagine they were used to much weirder events happening on the regular.

"You may want to take a look at this one, sir," said Grantz quietly, pointing at one of the artists in particular, around whom several dozens people had gathered to watch her work.

The artist couldn't be more than ten years old, but her work was perhaps the most vivid of all those on display. It showed a human silhouette made of night sky, with stars shining within it, fighting against winged figures against a backdrop that had to be Arene burning. Lergen supposed this must be the 'Lady of Stars' he'd heard about. The painting's artistic value was matched only by how disturbing it was to have something like that painted by a child.

Something was definitely going on here that hadn't made its way into the preliminary reports. But what exactly, Lergen had no idea.

"That is impressive work," the Colonel admitted, "but apart recommending her to a good art school in Berun, what do you expect me to take from that ?"

"The Major will explain," was all the answer he got as the Lieutenant brought him inside the cathedral proper.

Inside, the Cathedral had been converted into a temporary shelter for the citizens whose homes had been destroyed during the battle as well as a makeshift hospital. Due to the city's position near the front, its hospitals were already overflowing with wounded soldiers, so all but the most gravely injured citizens had been brought here instead. Civilian doctors and nurses worked alongside military medical personnel, with volunteers pitching in to carry supplies, bring food and water to the wounded, change bandages, and other such tasks.

Lieutenant Grantz led Lergen to a door leading to a side-room. After knocking, announcing himself, and being told by a muffled voice to come in, he opened the door and the two officers entered.

A feminine figure in a full uniform with a gas mask stood ramrod straight behind a wheelchair, and Lergen felt the hairs on his neck rise as he recognized the woman for one of the Untoten, the flying killers responsible for the Empire's crushing victory in Legadonia. She saluted him as he entered, but kept one hand on the handles of the wheelchair.

And there, on the wheelchair, was Major Degurechaff. Her eyes were covered by a blindfold, but she still raised her head as Lergen entered. At the sight of her, still clad in her uniform under the blanket covering her legs, Lergen was once more struck by how small and fragile she looked, despite all that he knew she was capable of. What little of her skin he could see was even paler than he remembered.

"Major," Grantz announced, "I've brought Colonel Lergen as ordered."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she said in a voice that betrayed her exhaustion. "Please keep watch outside and make sure nobody is listening in on us."

The Werwolf saluted and left the room, leaving Lergen alone with one of the Empire's most dangerous weapons as well as a vampire mage.

"Hello, Colonel. Sorry for not getting up to salute you."

"Hello, Major. Don't worry, under the circumstances, that's more than alright. But Lieutenant Grantz told me you hadn't been injured ?"

"I wasn't, not exactly. I'll need time and special attention to fully recover, though."

"And … your eyes," Lergen asked hesitantly. "Are they … ?"

"I am not blind, Colonel, don't worry," she reassured him, before gesturing at her face. "This blindfold is here for the protection of others, not mine."

"The protection of others ?" Lergen repeated, confused.

"You saw the paintings outside, right ? The ones about the 'Lady of Stars' ?"

"I did," Lergen said slowly. "The Lieutenant specifically directed my attention to them on the way here. Why ?"

"Because that's me."

"… I beg you pardon ?"

"When the Republic attacked the city in support of the partisan uprising they orchestrated, I used a serum that transformed me into what you saw painted. A huge humanoid form seeming to be made from the night sky. When the serum's effect ended, I returned to normal, but not completely."

"You used a Projekt without authorization ?" Given the situation, she could hardly be court-martialled for it, but it was still a worrying sign. Lergen knew more than one officer at Headquarters worried that the Major was going to go on a rampage with Division Y's arsenal, and how hard it would be to stop her if that happened. He knew, because he was one of them : that scenario often haunted his nightmares.

"It wasn't a Projekt : it hadn't even been tested yet. When faced with the Eikons and with no way of escape, I took the risk of injecting myself with an enhancement serum we'd recently designed."

"You injected yourself with an untested serum ?" asked Lergen, appalled. The girl squirmed in her seat, looking ashamed.

"I know, I know. It was incredibly risky and even more unprofessional of me. But I didn't have a choice. It was either that or death, and then the serum would either have been destroyed or taken by the enemy … so, in the heat of the moment …"

"You are already paying the price for your recklessness," Lergen cut in, "so I think we'll ignore that for now. What were those Eikons you mentioned ?"

"I refuse to call them 'angels'," Degurechaff spat, "nor will I dignify these brutes with the title of knight."

She described them to Lergen, whose blood ran cold at the thought that the Republic had somehow found a way to create their own supersoldiers. How could Intelligence fail to notice that ? Wait, nobody in the Republic had known about Division Y either until the war started. Maybe neither side's spies had thought it plausible that their enemy would research such ludicrous-sounding concepts.

"We have secured the bodies of the ones who died during the battle," Degurechaff continued while Lergen was having an internal crisis. "They will be shipped off to Castle Schwartzstein for study as soon as possible. Several of them managed to escape, so we have to expect to face them in future battles against the Republic."

"We'll need all the intel we can get about them," agreed Lergen. "You're confident your people can find something useful ? From your descriptions, these Eikons are quite different from the sort of stuff Division Y usually works with."

"The Eikons may be shinier, but they still proved inferior products in the end. We will follow all proper procedures, but I'm sure we'll find out something useful from cutting their corpses apart."

Suddenly, Lergen was hit by the thought that he was discussing the dissection of angel-like beings with a little blindfolded girl sitting in a wheelchair inside a Cathedral, with her vampire bodyguard listening on the conversation while a werewolf kept watch outside. This was definitely not what he had signed up for when he had joined the Army.

Well, at the very least the fact they hadn't all been struck dead by lightning so far was a good sign. And none of the supersoldiers appeared affected by standing on consecrated ground either, come to think of it. Something to note for later, if it ever came down to a propaganda battle with the Republic.

She continued with a detailed report about what had happened, starting with the arrival of the Eikons and ending with her collapsing in the Kalerian Cathedral after killing most of the attackers and forcing the rest to flee. The more she spoke, the more Lergen could feel his stomach twist painfully in his guts. All in all, he couldn't deny that she'd behaved like a true hero of the Empire, up to sending her own bodyguard away to assist with the wider tactical situation.

"What exactly was that serum you used to fight the Eikons ?" he asked when she was done.

"In the instructions we used to create it, the serum is called *Kosmosblut*. I am not going to bore you with the detail, but it is incredibly difficult to prepare, requiring the mixture of specific reagents and the exposure of the resulting solution to very precise frequencies of light and sound for extended periods of time. What I used was the only dose our alchemists had produced by the time I left Castle Schwartzstein for the Rhine."

"*Kosmosblut*, Blood of the Cosmos …" A disturbing thought struck Lergen. "Any relation to Projekt K ?"

"Of course not !" Degurechaff immediately replied, sounding genuinely outraged that he would even suggest such a thing. "I would never deploy Projekt K inside a city, be it Imperial or Republican ! If not for the fact the Francois had already deployed their own magically-enhanced supersoldiers, I would never have used the Kosmosblut either. I only took it with me because there was no time to properly secure it before my departure, and I was worried the researchers would get over-enthusiastic and try to test it in my absence."

"That is quite the lucky coincidence," Lergen remarked. "If you hadn't had it with you when the Francois attacked …"

"Yes," she said, her face looking like she'd just bitten into a lemon. "Quite the coincidence indeed."

"Alright," the Colonel said. "That is quite a lot to take in, and I can see why you didn't put that in the report you sent over the telegram, especially since our enemies have proven they can intercept our communications. But to come back to our starting point, this doesn't tell me why you think you need to hide your eyes to protect others. I can understand needing to conceal changes that most would find frightening, but that's not the same thing."

There was a pause, as the Major visibly struggled to find her words for the first time since Lergen had met her.

"You have seen the state of the city," she finally said. "Did anything strike you as strange ?"

"Well, now that you mention it, the people of Arene appear remarkably calm and peaceful, given the circumstances. I would have expected a lot more simmering resentment. The Republic might have started the trouble, but I'd assumed they would still blame the Empire for the consequences."

"Nationalism is a powerful mind-warper," agreed the Major. "But, it turns out, it's not the only such business in town. Look at the table next to you : there should be a pamphlet on it. Please read it."

Lergen did as she said, his blood running cold as the implications of the rant printed on the cheap paper set in. When he was done, he put the pamphlet back down as if it were a live grenade.

"Major Degurechaff," he said at last. "Did you just start a cult ?!"

"It wasn't on purpose !" she all but whined. "Our working theory is that my transformed aspect inflicted some kind of mental contamination to all those who saw it. That's why I ordered the quarantine of the city and the blackout on communication until we were sure it can't spread. And even after I returned to normal, my eyes were still weird, so …"

Lergen thought for a moment, then said, as firmly as he could : "Show me."

"Colonel ?" She sounded genuinely surprised.

"Show me," he repeated. "I'm familiar enough with your methodology to know you haven't tested whether you are still capable of this mental contamination and chose to err on the side of caution. That is commendable, but the Reich needs you at full capacity, and you can't do that while deliberately blinding yourself."

"But you might end up brainwashed or something !" she protested. Lergen smiled bitterly.

"Major, if you accidentally mind-controlled an entire city, then we have much, much worse problems than that. We need to know whether what happened to the citizens is really some kind of supernatural effect or a quote-unquote natural result of witnessing such an apocalyptic battle. It's not as if there are a lot of psychological studies on the subject."

Lergen was aware that he was being uncharacteristically reckless here, of course. But the mere thought of what the Major was suggesting was a diplomatic nightmare. Forget the vampires and werewolves, forget the destruction of the Dacian Army and all the fears of the other nations about the rise of the Empire as a continental superpower : if the other powers suspected the Empire could bend the minds of others into accepting their sovereignty, then there would be nothing they would stop to in order to destroy them utterly. And truth be told, Lergen couldn't blame them. The very notion of such violation of Man's sacred free will was deeply revolting.

"But … alright. On your own head be it."

She reached up hesitantly and pulled her blindfold down, revealing her closed eyes to Lergen. Then she opened them, revealing two black orbs in which swam entire galaxies. Lergen felt himself pulled in, and a crushing sense of futility fell upon him at once. They were so small, all of them, the soldiers and the Empire and even the entire world. Less than a speck in the immensity of the cosmos, and yet they spent so much time, effort and blood fighting each other for such stupid reasons …

But then, he had already known that, hadn't he ? He had spent enough time fighting in the pre-war border skirmishes against the Legadonian Entente to know the brutality of war. Lergen had joined the Army to do his duty, to protect the Fatherland and its people, because he genuinely believed in its meritocratic and scientific values. The Reich wasn't perfect, of course, but that just meant it was up to its citizens to work to improve it. And humans might be small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but they were still alive, and still struggled for a happiness they couldn't even define most of the time. And regardless of what the universe said, that mattered.

Eric von Lergen blinked, and the pull of the Major's gaze vanished. He was back in the side-room of the Kalerian Cathedral, shaken but still himself as far as he could tell.

"So ?" Degurechaff asked after replacing her blindfold.

"I do not think I would call it brainwashing as the concept is understood in popular media," he said slowly.

"You don't feel any different ?" Degurechaff sounded like she was containing her relief, which was good, since it meant she understood how wrong it would be to mind-control

people. "I mean, the Imperial soldiers didn't seem as affected as the locals, but even they confessed to being shaken somewhat."

"No, I feel fine. Of course, I didn't get the full effect, but perhaps the Imperial mindset is less susceptible to that kind of shock, as we are generally less spiritual than the Republic." That wasn't to say the Empire wasn't religious, of course, but it did tend to a more pragmatic approach to religion compared to its neighbours, especially in the last few decades with the rise of the scientific approach to magic. "The quarantine should probably continue until you can bring in some experts and we have done some damage control. Have there been any incidents related to this ?"

"No. So far, the effects on the population it seems limited to rejecting the Republic, which given they set fire to the city and planned to use its people as meat shields is understandable, and wanting the war to end, which everyone wants apart from the arms merchants on both sides." Much as Lergen would have liked to call that excessive cynicism, he couldn't. "It's the religious undertones that worry me. There haven't been any actual gatherings of this Path of Stars, unless you count the crowd outside the Cathedral."

"Well, the Empire guarantees freedom of religion so long as no laws are breached," Lergen shrugged. "We'll have to make sure nobody links you to the Lady of Stars, unless you'd enjoy being a figure of worship ?"

To Lergen's great relief, Degurechaff's reaction was one of unrestrained disgust.

"Good," the Colonel continued, ignoring the fact that the words the Major had used to describe what she thought of that weren't something a child her age had any business knowing let alone speaking out loud in an adult's presence. "Now, onto business. When I arrived, I expected to meet you in the local headquarters of the army. Is there a reason why you are staying here instead ?"

"I took refuge here after the battle, and was too exhausted to move. By the time the situation had calmed down, getting me out without anyone noticing would have been more trouble than it's worth. Besides, it's not like the Imperial military doctors in the city can do anything to help."

"In truth, I still find it hard to believe the Republic would go that far," Lergen said, shaking his head.

"I know what you mean," replied the Major. "Striking at the train facilities makes perfect military sense. Timing the attack to happen while I am there recovering Projekt V is also perfectly logical, and yes, they knew I was going to be there and when, so we'll need to check our communications for signs of enemy infiltration. But the uprising, that, I cannot forgive. They planned to use the civilians as human shields, Colonel."

Lergen had thought as much when the first reports had arrived, of course. However repugnant, the Francois scheme had been obvious. What was more surprising was the disgust in the Major's voice as she spoke of it – if anything, Lergen would've expected her to admire the Republic's cold-blooded ruthlessness.

But then again, perhaps he was doing her a disfavor. For all his doubts regarding her character, Lergen had to admit that Degurechaff had always followed the exact letter of the regulations around her, and the Republic's partisan uprising had been a blatant violation of the laws of war covered by the romantic disguise of a heroic popular rebellion.

"If I hadn't been here," she continued, "if the Eikons hadn't shown up but just regular Francois mages, the partisans would have overwhelmed the Imperial Polizei and seized the city easily. And then the Empire would have had to choose between razing Arene to the ground or allowing the complete collapse of the Western Front. Can you honestly tell me, Colonel Lergen, that the Empire wouldn't have chosen to burn a city that had proven to be occupied by irregular troops rather than abandon its soldiers to die ?"

It was truly a nightmarish scenario, and Lergen couldn't reject the possibility out of hand. The Francois plot had truly been despicable, and it would have worked if not for Degurechaff. Hell, based on the damage he'd seen across the city, if the Eikons had focused their efforts on destroying the infrastructure instead of going for the Major, the Empire would have had no choice but to give ground to shorten its supply line or have the soldiers in the trenches fight with fists and harsh language instead of bullets and artillery shells.

"If the Republic is willing to go that far and use their own magically-enhanced supersoldiers, then we have to end the war as quickly as possible, or we might end up with nothing left worth fighting over. Which is why I'm going to have to ask for your help, Colonel Lergen. Visha, please give the box to the Colonel."

The Untote moved from behind the Major, reluctance obvious in her body language. She reached under the small bed and took out a plain metal box not much bigger than a shoebox and handed it over to Lergen, who picked it up cautiously. It wasn't very heavy, but he couldn't stop himself from shivering at its contact. A thick envelope was attached to its top with a wax seal.

"What is this ?" he asked, knowing the answer was unlikely to make him happy.

"This, Colonel, is Projekt V."

Lergen had to stop himself from dropping the box and jumping backward. Unlike Brigadier General Zettour, he didn't know what Projekt V was, but he knew the Major had asked permission to deploy it on the Rhine front in order to bring about a decisive Imperial victory, and the thought of holding a Wunderwaffe in his hands was an unsettling one.

"Why," he asked, doing his best to conceal his feelings, "are you giving me this, Major ?"

"Because now that I am in a state to travel, I have to return to Castle Schwartzstein. The mages there have the expertise needed to assist in my recovery, and more importantly, I need a proper check-up to make sure the after-effects of the Kosmosblut had limited to what seems obvious." She smiled tightly. "I don't want to end up sealed in an underwater temple for the next ten million years, after all."

"… Understandable," replied Lergen, choosing not to think too long about what she meant by that, for the sake of his own peace of mind. "And what does that have to do with giving this

to me ?"

"The Imperial Army still needs the support of Division Y to win on the Rhine Front," Degurechaff explained. "With the appearance of the Eikons, the deployment of Projekte U and W is more important than ever, and we must achieve victory before the Republic has a chance to advance its own research into Elder Magic and creates more Eikons, or something even worse. With me not in a state to command the operations of Division Y, someone else has to take charge of its assets."

Oh no. No no no no no, she couldn't possibly be saying …

"Division Y operates under the direct command of the Central Headquarters," she continued mercilessly. "As a representative from Brigadier General Zettour, you have the authority to take over operations on the Rhine while I'm away. The letter attached to the box contains my recommendations on how to use its contents for maximum efficiency, which will require coordination with the Western Army commanders. If you agree, Lieutenant Grantz will help you liaise with the other instances of Projekte U and W on the front."

'If you agree', hah. As if he really had a choice. For months, Central Headquarters had foisted off the responsibility of managing and deploying the Wunderwaffen on a prepubescent girl. Regardless of his misgivings and the burning feeling in his stomach, how could Lergen possibly refuse to bear that burden while she recovered from her efforts to single-handedly save the Empire from being forced into a situation where there wouldn't have been any good choice to make ?

Still, there were some points he needed to clarify.

"Are you assured that your … people, will follow my orders ? I know they have great respect for you, but I am an outsider to Division Y, regardless of the chain of command."

"That won't be a problem," she assured him. "I have trained them well. But if you're worried, you can use Grantz : he's one of our most powerful instances of Projekt W, and the most disciplined."

"Then I'll be relying on the Lieutenant's assistance. Are the details of Projekt V's effects detailed in your notes ?"

"Yes, inasmuch as we understand them. We know what the end result will be and the broad strokes of how that will be achieved, but the nature of the Projekt made it difficult to do precise analysis." She paused, seeming to hesitate. "That section of the note is written on a different paper than the rest. "It might be better for you not to read it, to be perfectly honest, Colonel. The work of Division Y isn't exactly conductive to a resting sleep or a healthy mind, especially for someone like you who hasn't been exposed to it."

"I am touched by your concern for my well-being," Lergen said with a touch of asperity and dry sarcasm, "but if I am to pull the trigger, then I should know exactly what it is the gun I am firing is capable of. That, too, is my duty as a soldier."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Then Visha and I will depart as soon as we can find a train. I wish you luck and success, Colonel Lergen."

"Thank you. You know, when I pushed for your transfer to research group instead of combat, this isn't what I had in mind," Lergen sighed.

She smiled, the first expression he had seen on her face that looked like it belonged on a child her apparent age. Of course, her next words immediately broke that fragile illusion :

"Believe me, Colonel, this isn't the career path I expected for myself either when I volunteered to join the Army. Still, don't think I am not grateful for your efforts to keep me safe from harm, even if that didn't pan out like either of us would have wanted."

Lergen blinked. Was she really saying – no, that was ridiculous. And yet … could it be that, just like she had said the Wunderwaffen were able to twist the minds of people, her own warped nature had been affected by the work of Division Y, making her, if not less disturbing, then less violently so ?

That would be deeply ironic, to be sure. Someone as ruthless and cold-blooded as what he had seen several years ago at the military academy, actually developing a semblance of humanity due to exposure to the dark wonders of Division Y … the poets of the future would get a lot of inspiration from it, if the details ever became public.

Although it would no doubt be a long, *long* time before the truth about Division Y was ever declassified, if it ever was.

---

*May 7th, 1925 – Parisee – Ministry of Defense*

Pierre-Michel De Lugo sat back behind his desk and sighed deeply in relief. The last few hours had been draining to say the least.

He had managed to convince the President not to have him and every other officer who had signed up on the Arene operation demoted, arrested or shot, and though the latter had always been unlikely it had theoretically been within the realms of possibility. Regardless of rank, war crimes (and that was what the Arene operation had been once you stripped all the paint) were punishable by summary execution if circumstances demanded it (which was a fancy way of saying if they didn't work out as intended and you lost). Pointing out that the Holy Knights who had returned from the Imperial trap were still their best shot at fighting the Wunderwaffen on something approaching equal ground had helped, as had off-handedly mentioning the fact that these most powerful of aerial mages seemed to be willing to take orders from him as Vianto's superior, but hadn't shown any sign of doing the same with anyone else.

It had been a shock when the flight of angels had landed in the Ministry's courtyard after dazzling their way through the anti-air forces defending the capital, none of whom had been willing to open fire on or otherwise challenge absurdly powerful but still familiar mana signatures using fully official security codes. After their landing, they had transformed back

into their human forms, though their eyes had still blazed with golden holy light, and their skin had become as pale marble, all mortal imperfections smoothed away.

Listening to their tale of what had happened to Arene, De Lugo had felt himself on the verge of a mental breakdown more than once, holding himself together through sheer will, faith, and bloody-mindedness. The confirmation that God was on the side of the Republic had been welcome (in the privacy of his own thoughts, the Vice-Minister could admit that he'd entertained doubts in the dark, sleepless hours of the night), but it was unfortunate that mere men were flawed vessels for His power. Had Vianto and his men been in full possession of their faculties during the operation, De Lugo was certain the outcome would have been much different – but then again, who was he to question the will of the Lord ?

And now at least they knew the name of their enemy, the head of Division Y and source of all their woes. Tanya Degurechaff, the Devil's apostle on Earth, a monster disguised as an innocent-looking child who had led the Empire down the path of perdition and who could face off twelve Holy Knights and emerge victorious, defiling the very steps of a Cathedral with their blood in the process.

All was not lost, however. While the liberation of Arene had failed, Vianto and his Holy Knights had still dealt a blow to Imperial logistics by damaging the city's railway, and forced the witch to use the Wunderwaffe with which she intended to crush the Republic in the Rhine prematurely. They needed to use the time bought by Vianto and the others' sacrifice wisely. The rest of the Republic's military leadership were despairing over the failure of their operation on Arene, but they were fools, lacking in vision and audacity. Yes, the stated goal of Vianto's deployment had failed, but the opportunities it had revealed were still there, waiting to be seized.

De Lugo had asked the Archbishop what he needed to bless more Francois with the might of the Lord. The old man had assured him that the only requirement was for men of faith and magical power : the latter so that they would know the basics of how to wield His boons, and the former so that they wouldn't be destroyed by them. Even then, Beauvais had been clear that the Second Wing of Special Operations had been especially blessed, and that those who would follow in their footsteps wouldn't come with the same divine guarantee of being suitable.

Those chosen to become Holy Knights would pay a price for the power to defend their homeland, but De Lugo knew there would be no issue at all with finding volunteers among the Francois mage corps. State and Church might have been separated in recent years, but the Republic was still a nation of faith, and none would turn from the choice of laying down their lives in its defense.

In the time the Second Wing had gained them, the Republic would assemble a true host of Holy Knights. With those, they would slay the Empire's unholy monsters and the witch leading them, and claim eternal glory for the Francois Republic. Beyond the joy that went with doing the Lord's work, nobody would question the Empire's dismantling once the corruption of its leadership was revealed. At long last, the threat to Francois would be removed from the nation's border.

This was God's will, and De Lugo would see it done no matter the cost.

*May 10th, 1925 – Londinium*

The Round Table met once more, in the same well-furnished room where they had convened after the fall of the Osfjord. Unfortunately, the reason for that meeting still wasn't any good news, although whether the news were as bad as they had been last time was subject to debate. Various documents were spread across the table, from mundane newspapers to confidential reports that would need to be burned after the meeting was over.

"You are certain there is absolutely no chance this mess in Arene will be linked to us ?" Kay asked Agravain.

"None whatsoever," the group's spymaster assured him. "We withdrew our last operative in the city weeks ago, the moment we caught wind of the Republic's plan. If the uprising had worked and Arene had been liberated, the last thing we'd have wanted was to give the Empire the excuse of the whole thing having been orchestrated by 'foreign elements'. There was a few exchanges where we handed over the keys to a handful of safehouses we kept that could be used to store smuggled weapons in preparation, but that's it."

"That's all well and good," scowled Mordred, "but that means our only source of information is this report De Lugo passed on to us. And we're lucky to have even that. Agravain, can you confirm that De Lugo isn't just feeding us a bucket of hogwash in the hope of making us join the war openly ?"

The Vice-Minister's message, discreetly passed on to their agents in Parisee, had claimed that the operation had failed due to the Empire deploying the Wunderwaffe it had meant to use to break the Republican Army on the Rhine Front once and for all. It also claimed to have identified one of Division Y's members by name, though it didn't say just how De Lugo had come by that information.

"We know that something happened in Arene, that much is clear," replied Agravain. "I haven't yet succeeded in getting people inside, but that's just a matter of time. Keeping a city sealed up is far more difficult nowadays than in the days where there were walls around every settlement. However, I can confirm that the wild rumors that the Imperials burned Arene to the ground are unfounded. The city is still very much there, and what damage there was appears to be minimal. There also doesn't seem to be anything violent going on, though my observers have noted a consistent congregation around the Kalerian Cathedral – but the Imperials haven't dispersed it either."

"Which means we can't even use this disaster to brand the Empire the enemy of the world," sighed Mordred. "What about the other part of De Lugo's message, about the identity of Division Y's chief of operations in the Rhine ?"

"Tanya Degurechaff," nodded Agravain, speaking the almost stereotypically Imperial name slowly. "I will get my people on the case, have them find everything about her. One good thing about the Imperial bureaucracy is that it keeps records on everything. If we are lucky, something will have slipped through the cracks when they classified her past that can lead us to Division Y. We'll need that kind of intel in the war."

"Are we ready to join the war, then ?" asked Mordred.

"As much as we can be," shrugged Kay. "The troops are mustered, the stockpiles are full, and we've recalled as much of the Navy as we can without compromising our interests in the colonies. There is always more than can be done to prepare, of course, but if you chase perfection you'll never get anything done. High command is putting the final touches on our deployment plans as we speak – mostly blockading the Empire, keeping them from landing troops on the mainland, and supporting the Republic where we can. What about Legadonia ?"

"We have made contact with the groups unwilling to accept the Imperial occupation," said Agravain with a slight scowl. "Welding them together into something usable was a challenge, let me tell you, but we got it done. They are planning to announce their existence to the Empire in a big, noticeable way soon, which should divert some resources over there at the very least, and help us secure a foothold for our own forces eventually."

"So all we need is for the Republic to hold on a little longer and we should be able to divide the Empire's efforts once more," concluded Mordred.

"That's not the only thing we need," Kay reminded them. "Unless we figure out a counter to the Wunderwaffen, throwing our hat into the ring is only going to get a lot of men killed without achieving anything but cement the Empire's position as a continental hegemon."

They had all watched the copy of the Republican recording showing the Imperial monsters at work in the Rhine. Once, they would have dismissed it at an obvious fabrication, although Merlin would have praised the skills of the mages who had cast the illusions. Now, they couldn't reject anything out of hand, which was a problem for many reasons, the least of which was that the Republic hadn't stopped using propaganda to demonize the Empire, making it harder to distinguish truth from lies.

The idea of sending the Kingdom's soldiers against such horrors as the Devils of the Rhine was far from pleasant. There didn't seem to be a lot of them, which was the only reason they were even contemplating joining the war instead of pressuring the Republic to start drafting the terms of its surrender while it still retained some negotiating power.

But as the Empire had so aptly demonstrated, it knew how to make use of those few it did have to devastating effect. And while De Lugo's message had hinted at the Republic having deployed some kind of counter-weapon (the Secret Services had yet to find out what exactly that meant, though they were on the case, if with a lighter touch than in the Empire), the fact that Arene had still been a monumental failure was a clear sign that the Empire still had the edge in that area.

Right now, their only possible counter was to create so many fronts that the Empire couldn't concentrate the awesome power of its Wunderwaffen on a single opponent, since each deployment of Division Y's work had been months apart – hence their efforts to keep the Republic in the fight and start trouble in Legadonia. The Kingdom's diplomats had also been hard at work trying to persuade the other powers to join in as well, but the Unified States were of two minds on the subject, and trying to get the Russy Federation to do anything was an exercise in madness. As for the other continental powers, the Ildoa Kingdom was

infuriatingly neutral, and the Ispagna Collective was too torn by internal political conflicts to get involved either.

"Agravain's people will hopefully find *something*, even now that Division Y is sure to increase their anti-spying measures in response to what happened in Arene. But we need something now. Merlin ?" asked Mordred. "Do you have anything for us on that regard ?"

"I searched through our entire archive of materials rescued from the Inquisition's pyres," answered Merlin, his words explaining the deep circles under his eyes. The Royal Wizard wasn't getting any younger, and trudging through that pile of old scrolls and books had clearly taxed him – and unfortunately, the nature of the restricted archives meant that he had to do the research on his own, without any assistant. "And while I uncovered some tidbits that should probably be sent to our own magical research divisions, I found nothing anywhere that could even begin to explain the capabilities that the Empire's Wunderwaffen have already displayed."

"Then it is as you first guessed," said Kay, "and the Imperials have developed entirely new spells and uses for magic ?"

"That's what I was going to conclude, yes." Merlin's expression became uneasy. "But just as I was going to throw in the towel, I accidentally stumbled onto something else."

"Accidentally ?" asked Agravain with a raised eyebrow.

"I knocked over a pile of centuries-old books unrelated to my investigation and one of them fell open on a page that immediately drew my attention, once I stopped coughing from all the dust." If Merlin had been less tired, perhaps he would have looked embarrassed by the admission; instead, the old magician looked unsettled, which was at odds with the serene and wise facade that, as the Royal Wizard, was part of the job description.

"Why was it unrelated then ?"

"Because it is older than the Inquisition's purges, centuries older, so it wasn't in my first, second or even sixth search. It was a collection of writings from the Dark Ages, apparently collated by an order of monks to which I found no further reference anywhere. Here," Merlin passed on a sheet of paper to each of his colleagues. "I did my best to translate the relevant passage. Take a look."

There was a moment of silence as the three other members of the Round Table read through the text, and another one as they digested what they had just read. In the end, Mordred was the first to speak :

"Well, that's … ominous. Agravain, you might want to warn your spies to be very careful in their investigation of Degurechaff. Just in case this is more than ignorance and superstition."

"That would probably be best, yes," agreed the spymaster.

*"We left the village at dawn, yet when we reached the end of the valley only a few turns of the glass (TN : a few hours) later, a blood moon shone in the sky, and vile stars looked down upon us. There laid the root of the evil that had plagued this land, a nest of beasts and men altered through forbidden magicks, made to possess unnatural forms and power to serve their dark master. I saw men who were beasts, and beasts who were men, and dead things that walked and hungered for life. I saw things I cannot describe, things I cannot remember, and others I wish I could not.*

*We slew them, though they slew many of us in turn, and finally came upon the figure of the Not-Man (TN : the closest thing to a literal translation would be 'the thing that looked like a man but was not'), by whose hands all these horrors had been made. Its skin was as shadow, not like that of the men of the lands beyond the southern sea but like the darkness of the deepest cavern, and its eyes alight with the very fires of Hell.*

*Of the three hundred who had left that morning, a third had already fallen, and before the Not-Man was finally slain half our number again had been sent to the Kingdom of God. But we were armed with blessed weapons and fought with the name of the Lord on our lips, and thus there could only be one outcome to this contest. We stood at last victorious, and watched the Not-Man as it expired, cursing us and proclaiming that it would return and wreak terrible vengeance upon our descendants, even should it take a thousand turning of the seasons for it to drag itself out of the darkest pits of Hell where it belonged.*

*Even with the fire of righteous victory in my belly, I still felt its dying words like a dagger of ice (TN : really just a fancy way of saying 'icicle') in my heart.*

*At the command of the priest (TN : literally 'blessed one'), we burned the temple/lair/workshop and all its foul contents. Then he salted the ashes and spoke words that made our ears bleed, and which left naught in their wake but dust, that all traces of the Not-Man and its foul works would be erased from the world. As we made our way back, under a sky that was once more mercifully blue, we were told not to speak of what we had seen : the Not-Man's victims were to be remembered as falling prey to evil bandits and feral beasts, lest other wayward souls be tempted to follow in the Not-Man's footsteps.*

*I know that I am breaking this command by writing these words, but the things I saw that hateful day haunt my nights, and I hope that by consigning them to parchment they may finally leave me be. I pray that (TN : The document ends here, rather abruptly. There is a note written by the copyist in the margins of the manuscript, however, indicating there was blood on the parchment from which this text was copied.)"*

Excerpt from the document presented at the Round Table meeting, translated from the source language by the Royal Wizard of the Allied Kingdom, original text dated late ninth to early tenth century.

Chapter End Notes

AN : I promised you a special POV, and it's our boy, Lergen ! Writing the POV of our dear, long-suffering Colonel was very fun. So fun, in fact, that it ended up being the longest POV in this entire story so far.

The translated text at the end was a last-minute addition due to the muse striking again and all but demanding at gunpoint that I add it in rather than just have Merlin sum up what he found out. And yes, that text and its implications are going to be relevant going forward. Also, I didn't even try to make the text look like it was written in 10th century English, because no. Just no. Also, Merlin translated it, so there. There is an in-story reason I didn't have to spend however many hours researching what that would even look like. If someone want to take a go at it in the comments, be my guest.

Next chapter will finally contain the use and reveal of Projekt V in all its terrible glory. But I am going to need to decide where exactly the story will go afterwards on the strategic scale : I have a lot of ideas and I know more or less how the story will end (well, I say 'know', but really it's more a direction, as I fully expect the story and its characters to force a few changes by the time we get there), but the road leading to it is still very much in flux. Right now, I need to decide whether to follow canon or not in regard to the Francois Republic. I am angling toward not, but that means I need to figure out what happens instead of more or less duplicating canon with added eldritch horrors.

Oh well. I will trust in the muse to figure it out. That, and your suggestions, of course. After all, the very concept of Tanya having a mind-warping field in her Lady of Stars form was something suggested by the readers. When I wrote the last chapter, I considered the changes of mind of the last two POVs to be 'natural' reactions to witnessing that sort of eschatological battle, but after everyone on SB assumed Tanya had twisted their minds without realizing it, I decided that made much more sense and shamelessly ran with it. Just like I shamelessly stole the idea of Tanya still having transformed eyes after the effects of the Kosmosblut ran out.

(The process to create the Kosmosblut that Tanya describes, by the way, is ripped off from the creation of Wodan's Blood, also more mundanely called the catalyst, from the comic book series Über.)

One quick question relating to YS lore : I am four volumes in of the LN, and I still haven't found a single mention of the A/B/C/etc ranking of mage potential that I have seen used in the fandom (most especially in A Young Woman Political Record, which was my entry point to the series and that I heartily recommend). Did I just miss it, is it an Anime-only thing (I haven't watched the anime, because my first reaction to Visha's character design was "KILL IT WITH FIRE" and I had other sources to draw from so I never went back to it, even if I probably should at some point), or did the fans make it up wholesale ?

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and look forward to your comments and suggestions. Also, thanks to Remorseful1 for gifting the last chapter.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"We have concluded our biological and magical analysis of Major Degurechaff following her use of serum 42-E during the Arene Incident (see document XIAN-9 for her full report as well as collated speculation on the nature and consequences of the 'Eclipsed Liberation' event). For now, it is our belief that the Major remain uncompromised as per the guidelines she laid down after her assumption of command, and suitable to continue operating as the Director of Division Y for the foreseeable future. As an added precaution, Lieutenant Serebryakov will remain at her side and inform the rest of the Division of any further development she notices.*

*The changes to the Director's biology appear to have stabilized, which implies that they'll be permanent. Despite their new appearance, her eyes remain able to see her surroundings as well if not better than before, with our tests revealing that she can now see light frequencies the human eye is unable to perceive. The mental contamination of her gaze has also been tested on volunteers from the Division's staff and some of the more unwilling subjects we keep in the dungeons : the former appear to be largely unaffected, but the latter have experienced mental breakdowns as a result of exposure, begging for forgiveness and a chance to atone for the crimes that led them to their present circumstances. While there certainly are applications to this, the Director herself has terminated that line of research, citing 'overriding ethical concerns'.*

*We have commissioned the workshops to build some sunglasses-equivalent that will block the effect without impairing her vision, although finding the correct prescription, so to speak, is expected to take some time. She has elected to continue using a blindfold in the meantime, except in private : the guards assigned to her office have been reminded to not let anyone in without appropriate warning so that she has time to replace the blindfold.*

*In addition, the production of new doses of serum 42-E, now reclassified as 'Kosmosblut' at the Director's suggestion, has already begun for further testing and use in extremis, although the Director has made it clear that testing on individuals other than herself is forbidden for the time being, until a better understanding of long-term side effects is obtained."*

Excerpt from an internal memo at Castle Schwartzstein, May 11th, 1925.

---

From : Colonel Eric von Lergen

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : The Rhine Front

Date : May 12th, 1925

*Brigadier General,*

*Preparations continue as planned. Despite my initial fears, Projekte U and W have remained under control in the Major's absence. The consolidation of our existing defensive lines is going well, and the repairs of the Arene railway hub are almost complete, allowing for a suitable stockpiling of the necessary supplies. If nothing goes wrong, we will be able to enact Operation Shock & Awe on the schedule initially proposed.*

*Though I must repeat my personal doubts on the wisdom of this course of action, I am ready to deploy Projekt V as part of the Operation. We have taken all possible measures to ensure its success. The officers of the Western Army have also been cooperative in laying down the groundwork : I would like to formally commend them and the troops under their command for holding the line that long. There have also been no notable issues in regard to the deployment of the Wunderwaffen in the trenches alongside the soldiers, although I would like to ask again that special attention be given to the psychological care of our veterans once this war is finally over.*

*War is never kind, of course, but the Rhine Front is especially cruel. Winning the war only to lose the peace would be a poor jest indeed.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Colonel Eric von Lergen

Subject : Response to the Eikon threat

Date : May 20th, 1925

*Colonel,*

*Our investigation into the specimens procured at Arene has concluded. While the details are too sensitive to send over telegram, we have determined that, should the Republic prove able to deploy the Eikons in significant numbers, they would pose a grave threat to the Rhine Front. Aerial mages should only engage them if absolutely necessary, with the knowledge that victory is highly unlikely unless they manage to use superior numbers and flawless teamwork to land strikes at maximum power – nothing else will pass through the Eikons' defenses. And while the Eikons showed a poor grasp of tactics during their first deployment, we cannot assume that this will remain the case.*

*Our calculations have shown that even instances of Projekt U would need superior numbers and to fight at maximum potency to be able to prevail, since the Eikons are likely to be able to detect them despite their stealth capabilities. Therefore, to avoid a severe reverse of the situation on the Rhine Front, I have dispatched a package that should reach you within a few days of this message.*

*Within that package are the fruits of our latest advancements regarding Projekt U, which should give the instances deployed under your command better odds against the Eikons. Additional instructions and recommendations are included within the package, but I want to*

*emphasize that, unless the situation absolutely demands it, you shouldn't use its contents. I trust you will make the correct decision should the need arise.*

*Finally, though it may be overstepping my bonds, the package will be accompanied by a bodyguard I have arranged for you personally. Your continued survival will be essential to the successful coordination of Division Y with the rest of the Imperial Army in the Rhine, and the risk of an attempted decapitating strike by Republican forces as well as 'unidentified strike teams' exists. I apologize for the presumption, but to be perfectly frank I'd rather you be angry at me than dead.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*"The first and most obvious conclusion we can draw from our study of the Eikon corpses brought from Arene is that the transformation does not revert upon death. That is assuming, of course, that the Eikons were humans at some point, but our investigation quickly confirmed that. Inquiries made to Imperial Intelligence have revealed that 'Severin Vianto' was a known Republican aerial mage, and analysis of his recorded mana signature has shown similarities to the one recorded by the Director's own computing orb, confirming the identity of the lead Eikon involved in the Arene attack. The alterations to this signature were, however, significant, both in how much more powerful it was at Arene than in previous engagements as well as in other, subtler ways.*

*The mental deterioration mentioned by the Director also seems confirmed by Intelligence's reports that, as a leader of the Republic's Special Operation branch, Vianto was known to be an effective tactician, unlikely to make the mistakes described in document XIAN-9. Given that all specimens exhibit the same deviations from the human norm and acted in total unison during the Eclipsed Liberation, this deterioration does not seem to be accidental but is instead an unavoidable side-effect of the process. Studying the brains of the specimens unveiled obvious changes, though just as for the rest of the Eikon body, there were no sign of any surgery.*

*On average, Eikons are two hundred and sixty-two point seven centimeters tall and weigh around two hundred kilograms (due to the damaged state of the specimens, getting a more precise number was impossible). The armor they appear to wear is in truth fused to their body, and will not even be dented by anything short of a high-caliber round, or a comparably powerful attack spell, a property that it retains in death.*

*Tissue analysis has revealed a much higher capacity to channel mana than any human mage, and study of their recovered weapons revealed the absence of any computing orb or equivalent, meaning that they were able to cast the flight and attack spells they displayed without the support of orbal technology. While there exist records of magicians being able to perform such feats before the invention of the computing orb, the existence of an entire group of such individuals in the Francois Republic having gone unnoticed for so long is highly improbable to say the least – and does not account for the other physical alterations. Elder magic, or something equivalent, is thus the most likely answer, although where the Francois got their hands on it is beyond the immediate scope of this report.*

*Research into a mean to revert an Eikon into their original human state, undoing the effects of the Elder magic that transformed them, is ongoing. While such a thing might seem impossible, anyone who has worked in Division Y long enough will know that what we instinctively think impossible rarely is in actuality : it is simply a matter of finding the correct way to break the boundaries of our knowledge and apply what lies beyond. Still, it is expected to take a considerable amount of time, but to paraphrase the Director, we need to be prepared in case the Eikons turn out to be only the heralds of something much worse.*

*At the moment, our most promising avenue of research is to use specifically tuned magical devices to cancel out the Elder energies ..."*

Excerpt from the Eikon dissection report of Division Y, submitted on May 19th, 1925.

---

*May 25th, 1925 – Francois Rhine Front Military Headquarters*

Elya, also known as Agent E of the Imperial Military Intelligence Office, walked straight through the side entrance of the fortress from which Francois high command oversaw the Rhine Front. She nodded to the Republican guards on both sides and flashed them her credentials, fast enough that they didn't have the time to really see what was written on it, but long enough not to make it seem suspicious. It was a delicate balancing act, but one she had plenty of experience with, and plenty of assistance selling.

After all, as far as they could tell, she was one of the many aides assigned to the generals presently stationed within the fortress, returning from the nearby village with a box of fresh food and a bottle of wine requisitioned from the markets there, something that happened frequently as the situation on the front lines deteriorated and even the blue-blooded rear officers found it difficult to justify using the Army's logistics for luxury items. Her uniform was completely authentic, and a carefully-wrought illusion spell gave her the look of a Francois male with the kind of good breeding that led to being assigned to the safety of the rear.

"Aren't you coming back a bit late ?" asked one of them, more out of curiosity than suspicion. It was a reasonable question : the sun had set over two hours ago.

"My bicycle broke down halfway back," she said with a long-suffering sigh. There was a pool of the vehicles kept on the base for various purposes, and an errand like the one she was supposedly returning from definitely fit. "I had to walk the rest of the way after I made sure the damn bottles weren't damaged."

They waved her in with a chuckle and resumed their watch. Really, she didn't need to put in that degree of effort : she was just a perfectionist. Well, that, and when you knew your life depended on your work, you tended to be willing to put in the extra effort, just to be sure.

In this case, however, the moment the sun had set over the horizon, everyone's attention had focused on the sky, not the ground. The Francois generals lived in terror of a nocturnal raid by the stealth mages who had brought Legadonia down and were tearing through the Republic's mage corps with wild abandon since their arrival to the Rhine Front. They had

kept their activities to the frontline so far, yes, but then the Entente commanders had thought the Osfjord was safe too – until it wasn't.

From what Elya had been able to determine, there were two entire mage wings stationed at the fortress, and great projectors had been set up, their beams of light searching the skies. Fortunately, they hadn't moved the mana detectors, the frontline officers having successfully argued that the expensive pieces of equipment were desperately needed in the trenches, and that they'd be useless against the stealth mages anyway. Such devices were designed to detect the high-powered mana emissions of flight mages rather than the more subtle spells Elya was using, but it was better to be sure.

She wasn't sure what good the Francois generals thought the mages would do in the event of a raid such as the one they feared, but she suspected the decision had been motivated by paranoia more than good tactical sense. And besides, pulling the mages from the frontlines at least kept them from falling victim to the hunters, so she supposed they were unlikely to complain. No aerial mage who fought on the Rhine was a coward, but it was one thing to risk your life against an enemy you could see and fight back against, and another to know there were hunters out there you couldn't detect and which would kill you the moment they sensed your presence, which they apparently could even if you didn't use magic in the first place.

In any case, these additional precautions had made it *much* easier for her to identify which of the several fortresses in the area served as the Republican headquarters.

Now past the fortress' walls, Elya carried the box she'd been given into the food stores, which were located inside what had been the wine cellar of the old castle the rest of the fortress had been built around in the decades since the last Republic-Imperial war. A few desultory words exchanged with the quartermaster complaining about their mutual superiors sending aides to get alcohol instead of doing their jobs, and she was allowed inside with only a perfunctory glance at her papers and the writing down of her assumed identity in the entry register.

Left alone by the tired watch officer, Elya swiftly moved past the piled up foodstuffs and laid down the box on the ground somewhere it would be seen by anyone just walking in, then knelt next to it and carefully – very carefully – opened its top panel, revealing its contents.

She couldn't suppress a shiver of unease, despite what she could see of the device being not that different from the control panels of the various devices she'd familiarized herself with during her time with the Army and Intelligence. There were several knobs and buttons, and a pair of clocks – one circle in green, the other in red. She had seen much more intimidating examples of Imperial ingenuity, yet there was something about this one that made her skin crawl.

She knew exactly how to activate the device : the detailed instructions had been sent to her along with the coordinates for the rendezvous, and the stealth mage had refused to hand over the package until she had repeated them to him three times in a row without any mistakes. They weren't difficult, though : for all that the device looked incredibly complex, its actual use had clearly been designed by someone who knew it was meant for front-line deployment and needed to be as easy and intuitive as possible.

A few buttons pressed in the correct order, and the device began to whine softly. Elya moved to the last part of the setup, turning one set of knobs until the green timepiece was counting down from one hour, as her orders had indicated she should. The clock would count the time until the device activated, and the red would count the time after that, until it triggered the small explosive charge inside the device. It wasn't strong enough to do any damage to the building, but it would destroy the device thoroughly enough that nobody would be able to learn anything from its remains – at least that was the theory.

The device's construction allowed the user to set the first timer, but not the second : once the device activated, it would remain operational for exactly ninety-one minutes. She'd no idea why such an arbitrary number had been selected, but she imagined the engineers who had assembled it had their reasons.

She closed the box, cutting off the device's quiet sound with the isolated padding that also doubled as a shock-absorber, and pushed it as far into the pile of other boxes as she could. When she finally let go, she couldn't stop herself from sighing in relief. Now all that she'd left to do was get out of the fortress and make it back to the rendezvous point. And she absolutely had to do it before the first timer ran out – her instructions had been *excessively insistent* on that point :

*'Should it become clear that you won't be able to get out of the weapon's effective range in time, it is our recommendation that you use any means necessary to terminate your own life.'*

When she had read that line in her orders, she had thought it was a joke, although one in poor taste. But the mage who had given her the box had insisted that she take that order seriously. With the kind of stare Elya'd seen far too much of on the Rhine Front, he had told her that he'd taken part in the weapon's testing, and a quick death by mage blade would definitely be a mercy.

Fortunately, she'd planned her exfiltration well. Within moments, she'd changed faces, assuming the identity of another aide, whom she knew was currently sleeping in his bunk – because she'd drugged his drink to make sure he didn't stay up past his shift. Claiming she'd an urgent message to carry in person, she took another bicycle and left the fortress through another gate than the one she'd come back through – just in case. Ordinarily, such a simple trick would have been found out soon, but in this case it wouldn't matter.

She rode as fast as she could in the darkness, using a spell to enhance her night vision so she didn't break her neck. Just less than an hour after the device's activation, she finally reached the rendezvous point, deep in the woods to the south-west of the fortress. The stealth mage was still there, and he greeted her arrival with a nod.

"You are alive," he said, his voice muffled by the gas mask he wore. "Good. Lieutenant Serebryakov would have been sorry if you had died."

Elya did a double take, then hissed : "What did you just said ?"

He was sounding amused, she was sure of it even through the gas mask.

"The Lieutenant was transferred to Division Y some time ago," he explained. "When she saw your name in the plans, she told me to do everything I could to help you get out alive."

Visha ?! Good-hearted, naive, precious little Visha, was involved in the work of Division Y, which had created the Wunderwaffen that had pushed back all of the Empire's enemies ?! And she was a Lieutenant too ?!

*And she hadn't told her ?!*

What the hell ?!

Of course, Elya couldn't really blame her friend for her secrecy, since as far as Visha knew she was working as an artillery spotter instead of as one of Imperial Intelligence's select cadre of mage spies. But still ! In the last letters they'd exchanged, Visha had told her that her duties nowadays mainly consisted of preparing coffee and helping her superior deal with paperwork, not assist in the construction of magical superweapons !

"Why are you even telling me this ?" she asked warily. She didn't think this was where she was disposed of for knowing too much, but you never knew in Intelligence.

"You are already involved in Division Y's work," he answered, and for a moment she thought her worst fears were about to become true after all. "After what you've done tonight, there's no going back to Intelligence for you : the Director has asked for you to be sent to us if you could pull it off, and you did. There is no more need for her to conceal what she's doing from you."

He bowed his head slightly. "Welcome to the family, Agent E. Now let's go home."

Before Elya could react to being suddenly told her career path had been changed without her knowledge or consent, he had picked her up and was flying away. As a former artillery spotter, she was used to flying under own power, but until they were back in friendly territory, using her own, detectable magic to fly would be incredibly stupid, so she had to be carried all the way back, and because she couldn't use her magic to protect herself from the elements either, he had to keep to a moderate speed.

It was going to be uncomfortable, but she could endure it. The soldiers in the trenches dealt with far worse every day the war continued, after all –

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sound of distant screaming, audible even over the wind rushing around her. She swallowed, her mouth dry.

"Is that … ?"

"Yes," nodded the stealth mage. For the first time since they'd met, Elya fancied she heard a hint of unease in his voice. "That is Projekt V at work. Congratulations, Agent E. You may just have won us the war."

Somehow, as she was carried back to the Fatherland she served with what sounded like the screams of all of Hell's damned rising into the air behind her, Elya didn't find that very

comforting.

---

*May 26th, 1925 – Imperial Central Command Bunker on the Rhine Front*

"Colonel Lergen," the specialist bent over the radio called out. "We have gotten word from Agent E. They have returned from their mission, and report that Projekt V was deployed with success."

In the command bunker, Lergen nodded gravely, knowing what those last six words meant for everyone who had been in the Francois headquarters when the device had gone off. He had read the detailed explanation the Major had included with the device, just like he had told her he would; and his sleep had suffered for it, just like she had told him it would.

Projekt Verhüllung was not as horrifyingly devastating as Projekt K had been. Nor was it as game-changing as Projekt U, which had completely overturned the paradigms of aerial mage combat, or as convenient as Projekt W, which was incredibly suited for trench warfare. Deploying it somewhere it would actually be useful had been, to put it frankly, a massive pain in the backside. Having the entire operation depend on the actions of a single spy embedded in Republican territory had been nerve-wracking : they had contingencies to carry on even if that step had failed (because of course they did, they weren't amateurs gambling the fate of the entire war on a single point of failure), but the Operation would've been much more costly in that case.

And yet, despite all these limitations, Projekt V was as terrifying as anything that had come out of Division Y's labs. According to the research notes he'd read, Projekt Verhüllung was a device that 'thinned the barriers between the different levels of reality, allowing the human senses to perceive things usually beyond their abilities, and allowing the senses of the creatures inhabiting this Beyond to perceive the humans in turn'. Whatever that meant, they had no idea what the creatures in question were, only that they seemed to react aggressively to the intrusion caused by the Projekt, killing everyone in the affected area until the device shut down.

Lergen had no idea how they had even tested this thing in order to refine the area of effect without accidentally killing themselves, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. For God's sake, the device didn't even leave *bodies* behind, only clothes, so if not for the blood sprays the researchers had found afterwards they wouldn't even know the victims were actually dead, and not dragged back to … No, he had to stop thinking about that. Now was hardly the time for him to go stark raving mad.

In any case, Lergen understood much better now why Degurechaff had so vehemently opposed deploying the Wunderwaffen of mass destruction liberally to win the Great War, as opposed to the supersoldiers. There was something distinctly unsettling, distinctly *wrong*, about being able to cause so much death with something so small as the box he'd been handed over in the Kalerian Cathedral. In a way, it was the epitome of Imperial efficiency, but the Colonel was terrified by the thought of what war would become if it were to be waged entirely with such weapons as a matter of course.

He checked his watch. They were still on schedule, even if the Untote carrying Agent E back had cut it a bit close. As the commanding officer of Division Y's forces on the theatre, it fell to him to give the order to begin the next phase of the operation.

Suddenly, he felt the weight of his responsibilities, of History itself, weigh down upon him. Hundreds of thousands of lives would be affected by his next words, and the very course of the continent itself would be altered, possibly forever. He almost hesitated, but then he remembered what he had seen in Degurechaff's stellar eyes. How small they all were, and how, in the end, it changed nothing.

His duty was clear.

"Begin phase three of Operation Shock & Awe," he declared, his voice sounding surprisingly calm to his own ears, and his order was immediately relayed along the entire frontline.

They had been preparing for weeks, and the Imperial Army moved like a well-oiled machine. In the northern half of the Rhine, the Imperial forces dug in their trenches, while in the south, the Werwölfe and Untoten charged as the spearhead of an unprecedented Imperial advance, their coming heralded by artillery and flights of bombers.

With the Francois high command eliminated, the Republican Army wouldn't be able to respond correctly. In the panic, the Empire would tear through their lines and force them to run or die, before turning north to capture the rest of the Republic's forces between them and the Imperial trenches in the northern section of the front. This was Operation Shock & Awe, a strategic encirclement of unprecedented scale made possible by the tactical application of the Wunderwaffen.

They had to advance as fast possible, both to avoid giving the enemy time to reorganize and because they only had a handful of hours of night left due to it being May. The Untoten could, technically, be deployed during daylight, but they were exceedingly vulnerable while the sun was out, and Lergen didn't want to be the one to tell Major Degurechaff that he'd lost one of her pet vampires by forcing them to take unnecessary risks. So far, Division Y had been incredibly lucky in that not a single one of its supersoldiers had died in the line of duty, and the Colonel didn't want to find out how its Director would react when that changed, especially now that it looked like she was growing a conscience. By their calculations, they had only a couple of hours left before the Untoten had to withdraw from the front.

The Werwölfe, however, would keep fighting as long as they could, which was a very long time indeed. According to Lieutenant Grantz (who was out there with the rest of his kindred, slaughtering Republican soldiers by the dozen), their type of supersoldier could fight for hours on end without getting tired, which was the kind of endurance drill sergeants throughout History had only dreamt of forcing into their trainees.

Sitting in the bunker, Lergen listened as reports filtered back in over the radio. Unit commanders reported in clip, professional tones, sometimes asking for support, much more often confirming that the attack had taken the Republic completely by surprise after the lull since the attack on Arene, and that the enemy was completely disorganised.

They were advancing apace, tearing through the Republic trenches. Some units were holding their ground, while others were retreating northwards, and others still were just breaking and running, their morale finally shattered by the sight of the Werwölfe charging ahead of the Imperial Army. As they'd planned, a modern army was utterly unable to function without its commanders coordinating its many elements. In this new age of warfare, individual acts of bravery and martial prowess counted for little next to the brutal arithmetics of carnage – unless they were performed by Division Y, Lergen supposed.

*We are going to do it,* Lergen thought as he looked at the map and saw the lines move in his mind's eye. He hadn't dared to hope, but now that victory was on the horizon, he couldn't help himself.

*We are going to win, and end this damnable war.*

---

*May 26th, 1925 – Parisee – Ministry of Defense*

Being woken up in the middle of the night was not something De Lugo enjoyed in the slightest. In the present circumstances, however, he could hardly blame the pale-faced servant who had shaken him awake and told him there was an urgent message from the Ministry. He'd dragged himself out of his bed, which he'd moved right next to the building since the war had started, and sat, blank-faced, as he was delivered news worse than he could've ever imagined.

For a moment, he had thought the news that the front headquarters had been attacked and lost were a nightmare conjured by his own feverish imagination, but he'd shaken himself from that foolish hope quickly and gotten to work. The fact that he'd received the news so soon was a miracle in itself, for which he gave thanks and praise to the Lord. It meant that there was still time for him to do something to react and try to salvage what he could from that disaster.

The brave soldiers who had been sent from the trenches to investigate the cause of the headquarters' sudden silence had managed to send word over the radio that the entire fortress was empty, with traces of fierce, desperate battle everywhere – but no corpses. Only scattered uniforms, torn and bloody, with no traces of the soldiers who'd worn them. Every electrical machine in the entire fortress seemed to be fried as well, and a handful of fires had started, which they'd done their best to quell before they reached the ammunition depots and blew the whole place sky high.

They had also reported a distinct feeling of unease as soon as they'd approached the area, as if something was watching them from the corner of their sight, only to disappear whenever they tried to focus on it. Ordinarily, De Lugo would have dismissed it as nerves, quite understandable under the circumstances, but now that he was aware of the fell bargain the Empire had struck in exchange for its detestable Wunderwaffen, it was clear the entire area would have to be cleansed of the infernal taint.

That was a concern for later, though. Right now, he had to find a way to save the Republic, and with it the only hope for God's servants to prevail against the horrors the Empire had unleashed. Thankfully, the Lord's guidance provided him with an answer worthier of the

Republic than the contingency plans he'd drafted to evacuate the mainland and continue the fight in the colonies, which was what he'd have been forced to do without the blessings bestowed upon his fatherland.

The ritual to create more Holy Knights could only be performed once every week on Sunday, and only twelve mages could go through it at the same time. That meant that, since the battle of Arene, they'd been blessed with thirty-six Holy Knights to bolster their forces. Combined with the survivors of Vianto's squadron, they had just over forty of God's blessed warriors to deploy

If possible, De Lugo would've wanted to put all suitable candidates among Francois' mage corps through the process before revealing them to the Empire in an overwhelming flow of righteous fury. But there was no time for that now. If the Republican Army was to be saved from its current crisis, then they needed to move out immediately, and pray that the Holy Knights would be able to turn the tide. The situation on the frontlines was a confusing mess, and he wasn't foolish enough to think he could possibly lead it from so far away.

It was time for one last throw of the dice. Along with the Holy Knights, De Lugo had painstakingly gathered the last scraps of military power the Republic had left to spare over the last few weeks, assembling a reserve force near Parisee. If the Holy Knights could just manage to stabilize the front, keep the Republican Army from collapsing long enough, and deal with the horrors Division Y had brought to the battlefield, then that force could serve as their counter-attack.

It was a risky tactic, and one De Lugo should definitely have submitted to the rest of the Ministry's officials for approval. But there was no time for that. He would just have to trust that God would see the Francois Republic victorious.

He gave the orders, and messages were sent to the reserves and the Holy Knights, who had been quartered within the Cathedral of Our Beloved Lady, soaking in its blessed atmosphere while they awaited the time to let loose their righteous fury upon the unholy.

The moment the last of his aides had left his office, De Lugo collapsed in his chair, exhausted and trembling. He'd done all he could : now it was in the hands of the brave men of the Republic, and God Himself, of course.

All he could do now was pray.

---

*"They are coming out of the walls !"*

*"That light ! What's that light ?!"*

*"WE ARE BEHELD !"*

*"Fire everything you've got !"*

*"It's no use ! Our spells aren't doing anything !"*

*"Then fly out of here and warn AAAAAARGH !"*

*"Hell ! We're in Hell !"*

*"Where the fuck are our reinforcements ?!"*

*"They got fucking EATEN !"*

*"The eyes ! The eyes the eyes the eyes THE EYES THE EYES THE EYES -"*

*"THEY ARE EVERYWHERE ! EVERYWHERE !"*

*"What the ... NO ! GET AWAY ! GET A-"*

*"Oh God in Heaven, protect Thy wayward servant ..."*

*"We've to get out ! We've to -"*

Excerpts from the transcript of an audio recording extracted from a half-melted computation orb recovered in the former Francois Rhine Front Military Headquarters by a flight of Republican aerial mages dispatched to investigate the silence of the headquarters following the activation of Projekt V. The record was heavily corrupted, far beyond what the damage to the orb explained : the visual feed was all but useless, and even the audio had to be heavily analysed to get anything recognizable out.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Here we are, at the end of the sixth chapter. As you probably guessed, this is not where the story ends : my initial plans got thrown out the window early on. Maybe when this story is finished and there is no need to worry about spoilers, I will tell you what I had originally planned.

Projekt V is based on the short story From Beyond, by HP Lovecraft, which you can find on Wikisource if you want to read it (it is VERY short and, rarity of rarities, devoid of racism as far as I could tell, if not anti-science, so it's worth checking out). Obviously, the device deployed here is much more effective than the one depicted in the story, on account of incorporating Imperial magitek and, you know, not being built by one crazy guy in his attic.

Elya is Visha's friend from Cadet School, before she was sent to the Rhine Front (and then, in this story, died, before her body was shipped off to Division Y and she became one of the Untoten). In the manga, she is an operative for Imperial Intelligence who, at the end of the raid on the Republic's headquarters by the 203rd using Schugel's rockets, shows up magically disguised as a Republican soldier and finishes off a spy of the Allied Kingdom who managed to get the mana signature of the Devil of the Rhine and the other members of the 203rd.

She doesn't have that role in the anime and certainly not in the LN, where I think she's just the artillery spotter she claims to be to Visha. But here is the thing : a couple of weeks ago, after I asked for suggestions on the Mythos equivalent of a tactical nuke the Empire could use to replicate what's achieved in canon with mage-guided missiles, I realized I still had to figure out how to bring the nuke in question to its destination.

And then I remembered that bit of the manga, and I started laughing like a deranged lunatic. When the pieces fit together like that, you don't question the muse, you just go alone with it and praise her generosity. Just like I did with the fact that the ritual to create Holy Knights can only take place on Sunday. I was looking for a way to keep De Lugo from running the Republic's entire mage corps through the process (which wasn't something lame like "logistics" or "internal politics") and thought of limiting it to Sunday ... and then, when I checked, I found out that the 2nd of May, 1925, which was the day I'd written Vianto and his squadron were transformed, was a Sunday according to our own calendar.

It's not that much of a coincidence (a one in seven chance is far from impossible), but I still wasn't going to ignore that.

Concerning the bodyguard that Tanya sent to Lergen (and isn't that nice of her ?), there are two options, and I have decided to leave the decision in your hand :

- The first is that Tanya sent a squad of Division Y troopers, armed with the weird guns Lergen saw in Arene.

- The second is that Tanya sent an instance of another Projekt, in this case Projekt P.

Regardless of what I end up going with, both will eventually be shown in the story, but the one chosen will get its chance to shine sooner. So tell me which one you are most interested in ! I can't promise I'll follow the will of the people, because this story is very clearly a Musocracy, not a Democracy, but I'll take it into account.

Next chapter will be the final battle of Francois, and the end of the current "arc", so to speak. As always, I look forward to your thoughts and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Intruding soldier : "Forgive my interruption ! Urgent message for the Brigadier Generals !"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Yes, you. What is the code ?"*

*Intruding soldier : "Sir ! The code is : The Reich is above all !"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Ah. Then it is done. Thank you, that will be all."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Ah ah ! Magnificent !"*

*Minister of the Exchequer : "Zettour ? Rudersdorf ? What does all of this mean ?"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "It means, my dear friends, that our plan to destroy the headquarters of the Republican Army on the Rhine Front using a new Wunderwaffe have succeeded. As of now, the Francois are nothing more than a disorganized mob, and our own forces have begun to advance in order to encircle and break them."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "So as you can see, your worries about the state of the war following the Republican attack on Arene, while well-meaning, were unfounded. Our apologies for concealing the fact that we stopped our advance only in order to prepare for this, but after the enemy managed to locate Division Y's movements in Arene, secrecy was paramount to Operation Shock & Awe's success."*

*Minister of Foreign Affairs : "If you have destroyed the Francois headquarters and are moving to encircle the army ... Then, forgive me if I am mistaken, but isn't the war all but won ? Should my staff and I get started on drafting the peace treaty ?"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "It is not wise to tempt fate so, Minister. We have received troubling reports that indicate that the Republic might have magical superweapons of their own. But do not fret : precautions against such an eventuality have been taken, and the officer in charge on the front has my full confidence. As for the peace treaty, you would know about such matters better than I, I'm sure."*

Excerpt from the minutes of a late-night meeting between Brigadier General Hans von Zettour, Brigadier General Kurt von Rudersdorf, the Chancellor of the Reich, and various Ministers, May 25th, 1925.

---

*"Colonel Drake,*

*You and your unit are to deploy at once, fly across the Dodobird Strait, and head straight for the Rhine.*

*The Imperials deployed another of their nightmare weapons, and now the Francois Army is collapsing after their headquarters were somehow taken out without anyone noticing the Imperials slipping past their lines. The Reich's forces have taken advantage of that mess, obviously, and our people in Parisee tell us the bulk of the Republican Army is mere hours from complete annihilation.*

*If that happens, the Empire will be all but unstoppable. Therefore, it's been decided that the Kingdom will get off the fence and join the war in earnest. Your unit will have the honor of make the first strike and announce that fact to our enemy.*

*Your target is the vanguard headquarters of the Imperial Army. Intercepted transmissions indicate that the local leader of the Division Y assets deployed on the field is located. Apart from whatever wiped out the Francois headquarters, they have also deployed two different kind of supersoldiers on the Rhine : the stealth mages that took down the Osfjord, and some sort of anti-infantry monsters that tear through tanks like paper.*

*If you encounter the later, run away. If you encounter the former ... you will be remembered.*

*Attached are the details of your assignment. Be aware that intelligence acquisition is just as important, if not more, than preventing the destruction of the Francois Army. Even if we manage to turn things around this time, it won't mean anything if we can't stop the Imperials from doing it again.*

*Also, though we don't have any details, we know that De Lugo has launched some kind of desperate, last-throw-of-the-dice operation. We aren't expecting much out of it given what happened the last time the Francois tried to get clever, but keep an eye out for that.*

*For King and Country."*

Excerpt from the deployment orders received by Colonel Isaac Dustin Drake, Albish Aerial Mage Forces, May 26th, 1925.

---

*May 26th, 1925 – Imperial Central Command Bunker on the Rhine Front*

So far, everything was going as planned.

Entire Republican units were surrendering, their morale already battered from the weeks of being pushed back by the Imperial Army's occult combined arms tactics followed by the ominous pause during which the Empire had prepared for Operation Shock & Awe, and then the sudden silence of their headquarters accompanied by the unleashing of the Werwölfe.

In one notable instance that would probably end up in the history books, an entire regiment of Francois infantry had shot half its own officers before freeing an Imperial soldier they had taken captive a few days ago, given him his weapons back, and then promptly surrendered to him before handing him a radio and asking him to call his friends and please ask them not to kill them all, thank you very much.

Colonel Eric von Lergen knew this wasn't cowardice, no matter how some might choose to see it. These men had simply been pushed to the breaking point by the repeated failures of their leaders to solve the crisis presented by Division Y's supersoldiers. It was one thing for a patriot to give his life in defense of his country, and quite another to die pointlessly after the battle and the war had already been decided. The Empire's broadcast on all frequencies announcing that offers of surrender would be accepted in accordance with the laws of war, perpetually reminding the Francois that the nightmare around them could end if they just managed to make their capitulation clear, had also helped. Some were still willing to fight to the death or too afraid of the Werwölfe to risk captivity, but they were a comparatively small number.

The frequently-updated map in front of Lergen showed that the encirclement was almost complete, and when it was, the remaining Republican commanders would have no choice but to surrender or risk being shot by their own men. It was a textbook example of the art of war, which would go down in history even if all the bits about the Untoten and Werwölfe needed to be censored.

Yes, everything had been going well for the few hours since Operation Shock & Awe had begun, which meant Lergen's stress kept getting worse as he waited for what his pessimism told him was the inevitable moment where this ceased to be the case. When the bad news finally arrived, it was almost a relief.

"Colonel Lergen," one of the radio officers called out, "the Eikons have been sighted."

Ah, there it was.

"How many ?" he asked.

"We are still collecting data, but definitely more than those who escaped Arene."

Shit. That wasn't good. They had hoped the Republic had expended its trump card in the failed attempt to kill Degurechaff and lay waste to Arene. Instead, as they had feared, that group had just been the vanguard.

"Where are they ?"

The Eikons had struck the Imperial units moving to surround the Republican Army in the flank upon their arrival (assuming they had flown here in a straight line, they must have come straight from Parisee itself, and Lergen shuddered at the thought of Division Y working in Berun).

Getting a clear picture was difficult, but in short : it wasn't good. Division Y's assessment of the Republic's supersoldiers had been on point. The Eikons were throwing around the kind of spells that normally required entire mage squadrons working together. They were moving all across the battlefield helping take the pressure off the beleaguered Republican troops, and shrugged off anti-air fire as if it were a gentle rain. Heavier calibre might be theoretically able to shoot them down, but that was easier said than done.

As one might expect, the Francois were taking heart from the sight of angelic warriors coming to their aid in their most desperate hour. The collapse of their chain of command had all but destroyed them, but now that they didn't need to keep running or die, front officers were starting to reach out to one another.

Lergen checked the clock. The Eikons had doubtlessly flown here straight from wherever the Republic had hidden them in the middle of their capital city at full speed, but even so, there was only a little less than two hours of night left. And even if they had more time, ten Untoten against superior numbers of Eikons was a losing proposition according to Division Y's analysis. If all the mage wings still fighting focused on the Eikons to overwhelm them, then maybe they could win, but the casualties would be atrocious.

Which meant that it was time for him to do his job and give the order he had hoped he wouldn't have to give since the box Major Degurechaff had sent as insurance had arrived.

"Transmit the following order," he told the radio officers. "All instances of Projekt U are to fall back to my position for resupplying prior to immediate redeployment."

All communications were encrypted, but it didn't hurt to be cautious and keep the order as vague as possible. Besides, the less Imperial soldiers knew the true nature of the Untoten, the better. Keeping a handle on the rumors about the Werwölfe was difficult enough (as far as the average trooper who saw them fight was concerned, they were supersoldiers created by a classified military research program, their nightmarish appearance was the result of an illusion spell meant for intimidation purposes, and the details were above your pay grade so move along, soldier).

The insurance package the Major had sent him contained ten small bottles. In her accompanying letter, Degurechaff had made it clear she wasn't happy about the prospect of essentially giving combat drugs to vampires, and Lergen couldn't say he was happy about it either. Imperial regulations proscribed the use of such substances for normal soldiers except in very particular situations (though there had been word about lifting those as the war dragged on, nothing had been done yet), and for good reasons.

Still, judging by the research notes that had also been included with the bottles, he could expect good results of this *'Endlose Nacht'* serum.

---

*May 26th, 1925 – The Rhine Front*

Grantz knew that the Republic had taken to calling the Werwölfe the Devils of the Rhine. It was as fitting a name as any, really. The Rhine was a Hell created by human hands, and so too were the Werwölfe monsters created by the ingenuity of Mankind.

*I wonder if the demons of Hell also want the suffering around them to end ?*

Given the stories that they had once been angels cast down for rebelling against God, maybe that was the case. At the same time, however, Grantz couldn't imagine that Hell was worse than the Rhine Front. After all, there were only damned souls in Hell, whereas war consumed everyone, sinner and innocent alike. It was perhaps cruel, but it was ordered.

Whereas this ? This was madness.

At first, the Republican Army had cheered their deliverance when the Eikons had arrived. But most of those cheers had soon faded away. The Eikons' voices were booming across the battlefield, calling for all true sons of Francois to stand their ground against the Empire's vile heresies. And when that wasn't enough, they didn't seem to hesitate in firing with those Republican units who kept retreating – even when doing so in order to regroup with other units was clearly the best tactical option. Grantz wasn't going to say the Eikons were killing more Republicans than Imperials, but it was still appalling to witness. Which was why he now stood against one of Francois' counterfeit angels, with a gaggle of terrified soldiers of two countries behind him.

The Imperial soldiers had been escorting a company of their Francois counterparts out of the chaos after they had surrendered when the Eikon had started raining fire on them indiscriminately, killing prisoners and captors alike. Grantz had seen it happen from afar, and before his mind had caught up with what his body was doing, he had covered the entire distance and was howling at the flying warrior, trying to get his attention away from the men he was slaughtering.

Wonder of wonders, it had worked. If the Francois supersoldier had stayed in the air and bombarded him with spells, Grantz would have had no way of fighting back. Instead the Eikon had come down to fight him face-to-face. But then, it was clear the Eikon's sanity was questionable at best. There were countless more valuable targets than this group of infantry soldiers.

What had the Republic done to these men to warp their minds like that ? Grantz had seen many things during his time in Division Y, but never anything such as this. It was as if the Eikon had abandoned all reason, all logic, in favor of a twisted fanaticism that should have been left in the dustbin of History centuries ago.

His preternatural senses were screaming at him that there was something wrong with the being before him, like a diseased animal that would never recover from its sickness and needed to be put down before it spread its plague to the rest of the flock.

**"It is time to die, monster,"** the Eikon proclaimed, his voice utterly self-assured and dripping with zealous hatred. **"You don't belong in this world !"**

*"We are both monsters,"* Grantz replied, feeling the unnatural way in which his mouth moved to accommodate the human words. *"But at least I don't kill my own allies."*

**"Victorus aut Mortis. The true soldiers of God either triumph, or perish."**

*"They have surrendered. That means they are under the protection of the laws of war."*

**"There are no laws but the Word of God, and I am one of His Holy Knights."**

*"A Holy Knight ?"* Grantz laughed, keeping the rage he felt contained until it was time to unleash it. He had seen what the Eikons were capable of, and he needed every advantage he

could get – and making the enemy too angry to think was almost always a good plan. *"How foolish. You are nothing but a usurper, a false idol. An* Eikon*."*

**"I am His Word. I am His Wrath. I am His Judgment !"**

*"You are a deluded maniac who gave his soul in exchange for power. And from the looks of it, you got scammed in the bargain."*

The Eikon charged him, brandishing a flaming sword nearly the size of a man over his head. Grantz fired at him with his ranged attack : the blast from his third eye slammed into the Eikon's chest armor, but it only dented it. The Eikon barely stumbled from the impact, and Grantz moved to meet him head-on, blades erupting from his forearms without the need for conscious thought.

His blades cut deep gouges into the Eikon's armor, but failed to penetrate. Meanwhile, the Eikon's blow struck true, and Grantz was nearly blinded with pain as his left arm hit the mud. Absurdly, his first thought was that he had to recover it, but not to attach it back : they couldn't risk the Republic finding it and learning something from it. Then the Eikon kicked him in the back with enough strength to break something inside him, and he fell down into the mud. Scrabbling to turn around, he saw the Eikon towering above him, his blazing blade held high.

**"Beg for mercy, monster,"** he told him. **"Beg for the Lord's forgiveness, that He may cleanse your tainted soul in Purgatory."**

Grantz forced himself to laugh. Really ? This again ? Hadn't the Eikons learned anything from Arene ?

*"I am a Werwolf,"* he replied. *"We do not beg, WE HUNT !"*

He jumped up at the Eikon, only for him to move aside contemptuously and punch him in the chest with his weapon's cross-guard. Its touch send a new explosion of pain across the Werwolf's pain centers, and he fell back into the mud, twitching uncontrollably. It wasn't so much the pain that Grantz resented – being torn apart by artillery shells had hurt a lot more, as had the Rite of Union. It was the helplessness, as his body refused to move according to his will, his perfect control of his transformed flesh taken from him by the enchantments on the Eikon's weapon.

Was this how the Francois soldiers he had faced had felt ? Probably. Well, in that case, he could hardly die any less bravely than the few of them who hadn't tried to run from him.

Grantz stared up at the Eikon, defiant. His healing factor was already kicking in, but he could feel that it would take too long before he could move again.

**"Then may you burn in Hell along with all the rest of your miserable kind,"** spat the Eikon.

Then, the sun vanished behind dark clouds. The temperature plummeted, patches of wet mud freezing over.

**"What is this ?"** the Eikon questioned, looking up in surprise.

As if in answer, a human-shaped missile descended from the skies, screaming like a damned soul and slamming into the Eikon, sending them both crashing into the mud.

The Untote, for that was what Grantz's salvation was, had discarded his gas mask. His mouth was open wide, revealing his extended fangs in a mouth covered in blood. His eyes were two spheres of purest black, and his face was contorted in an expression of predatory ecstasy that had no place on a human visage.

The vampire tore into the Eikon, ripping his golden armor to shreds with claws wreathed in black un-light before biting into the exposed throat and gorging himself on the Eikon's blood. The Francois supersoldier struggled, weaker and weaker as his lifeblood was drained away, and then stopped moving entirely, his body going slack. In death, Grantz found that the Eikon looked much less impressive and much more like just another corpse laying on the mud of the Rhine.

When the Untote was done with his meal, he dropped the corpse and turned, letting Grantz see his face. There was only the barest hint of reason left in it, besieged as it was by savage joy and bestial hunger. For the first time since the Rite of Union, Grantz felt something like fear, but he forced himself to stand his ground : showing fear to a predator was always a mistake.

For a moment, the vampire held his gaze, then he was gone, flying off in search of more pretender angels to kill. Grantz let out a shuddering breath. He understood why Colonel Lergen had decided to risk handing over the Endlose Nacht to the Untoten, especially after fighting an Eikon himself, but that had still been a considerable risk. He was happy to not be an Imperial aerial mage any longer : the look in the Untote's eyes had made it doubtful they could distinguish between friend and foe while under the serum's effects.

*"You,"* he asked the one with a Captain's insignia on his uniform. *"What's your unit designation ?"*

He'd to give the man credit : he managed to tell him with a minimum of hesitation, despite being faced with over two meters of monstrous killing machine and having just witnessed an angel brought down by a frenzied vampire. Grantz committed the information to memory, then told him :

*"Get back to the rear with your prisoners, Captain, and make sure they stay separated from the rest."* His gaze passed over the other soldiers, who shivered as his inhuman eyes turned in their direction. *"None of you are to speak of what you witnessed today. This is all classified information, and we know the enemies of the Empire have spies searching for any scrap of information about the Wunderwaffen."*

He would have smiled if he thought that would've reassured them, but he knew what his smile looked like in that form, and now wasn't the time for them to pass out in fright.

*"You should also prepare yourselves for a change of assignment very soon. The Empire abhors waste, and you've proven your valor a dozen times over today alone."*

Once the men were in motion again, Grantz picked up his severed arm and followed them, keeping his distance so as not to make them panic. He might still be able to fight, but the Major would have his hide if she learned he'd stayed in the field after an injury like that when it wasn't absolutely necessary; and with the Untoten darkening the sun, only a fool would argue that was the case.

The clouds obscuring the sun all across the Rhine were underlit by fire and lightning as the Eikons fought the Untoten in the heavens. It was like walking through a rainless thunderstorm, made all the more terrible by the constant rumbling of artillery in the distance. The gods of the battlefield were fighting, and as always, it was mortal men who paid the price.

Forces from both sides were fleeing from the clashes between Eikons and Untoten, not even bothering with taking potshots at one another. It reminded Grantz of the effect the Major's own confrontation with the false angels had on the people of Arene : when faced with the sight of such powers battling above them, suddenly the struggles between mere mortals seemed all too insignificant, even if they'd been fighting to the death mere moments prior.

For his part, Grantz felt only awe at the spectacle. This was like nothing he had ever seen, and it made even the inhuman part of him uneasy (which was different from afraid, and he should know, having experienced more than his fair share of mind-boggling terror during his time on the Rhine Front as a rookie mage). Even as he watched, the part of him that had been trained to make full and complete reports to his supervisors in Division Y noted the way in which the greater battle was going.

From what Grantz could see and sense, some of the Eikons were giving a better accounting of themselves that the one he'd seen butchered like an animal, able to protect themselves from the Untoten's entropic sorcery with shields of blazing light. If he had to hazard a guess, he would say that those were the survivors of the first batch of Eikons that had attacked Arene and managed to escape the Major. It seemed the Republic didn't follow the rigorous documentation procedures the Major had forced all of Division Y to follow, if their prototypes were so much stronger than the ones created later. That would never fly in Castle Schwartzstein : results that couldn't be reproduced were all but worthless, except as potential new avenues of research.

But most of the Francois enhanced mages seemed to be of the same calibre and precarious sanity as the one he'd fought, and while they struggled mightily against the Untoten, they couldn't prevail and fell one by one. That was good, and yet Grantz couldn't help but remember the concerns that the Major had shared with him in the weeks following Projekt W's deployment on the Rhine, before the Eclipsed Liberation.

What would this look like to someone who didn't know war, who hadn't seen the Eikons fire on their own troops for daring to surrender ? Even in victory, there would be consequences for this. Of that, Grantz was coldly certain. He just didn't know what the full extent of those consequences would be.

Well, at least it wasn't his job to deal with things like that. Right now, he just needed to make sure he got back to safety in no more pieces than he currently was in, along with the Imperial and Republican units.

*"The Endlose Nacht serum is a development from the team researching Projekt U. While the process of creating new instances of the Projekt has been as streamlined as can reasonably be expected, the Director pushed for deeper research into the nature and abilities of the Untoten, as well as means by which the latter could be improved. The Endlose Nacht is one such improvement, and though it has long been in the works, upon returning from Arene the Director accelerated work on it in response to the newly discovered Eikon threat.*

*We discovered early in the Projekt's development that the abilities of the Untoten are fuelled by mage blood. More extensive testing also indicated that the more powerful the mage, the greater the energies the Untoten can extract from the same amount of blood. Given the scarcity of mages, finding a substitute to allow the Untoten to fight at their full potential with less logistical constraints was given priority. While we have yet to perfect a blood substitute suitable for their nutritional needs, imputing the research done so far into the Denkmaschine and asking it for suggestions returned the recipe for the Endlose Nacht serum.*

*The exact contents and preparation process of the serum can be found in file BLUT-U-819, and have been noted to share some similarities to the process of creating the Kosmosblut, 'in the same way making a soup is similar to baking bread', to use the words of one of the alchemists. Once the first dose was ready, Lieutenant Serebryakov volunteered for testing, and received the Director's approval after pointing out that given its expected effects, only someone who was absolutely trusted could be used. Given that even she struggled to resist the mental effects of the serum, despite her closeness and loyalty for the Director, it was likely a good idea.*

*Endlose Nacht dramatically increases the physical and magical abilities of the Untoten, giving them access to spell-equivalents of great entropic power. Unfortunately, it also induces a state similar to the frenzied rage that has been known to overcome non-augmented soldiers in the thick of battle, which in itself has been likened to the heightened state of awareness and joy that can result from drug usage. The effects of a dose last for a little over seventy minutes, but the duration can be increased if the Untote feeds during that period, potentially ad infinitum, although of course that possibility hasn't been tested due to our reserves of mage blood's paucity following the Legadonian campaign.*

*While the Director disapproves of the mental toll Endlose Nacht takes on its user, and is especially wary of the possibility of the Untoten developing a dependency on the serum, its military applications cannot be overstated. The Untoten's ability to fly undetected is what has made them such valuable assets to the Empire, but with Endlose Nacht, they can be elevated to another category altogether. With the threat of the Republic creating more Eikons for use on the Western Front, production of additional doses of Endlose Nacht for dispatch there has been approved."*

Excerpt from an internal Division Y memo regarding the Endlose Nacht serum, May 13th, 1925.

---

*May 26th, 1925 – The Rhine Front*

Colonel Isaac Dustin Drake, head of the Drake family of Albish mages, flew in the skies above the Rhine Front and cursed his luck, his superiors, the Francois Republic's incompetence, and the Imperials, in no particular order.

The two battalions of aerial mages under his command had flown across the sea in record time, before plunging south to strike at the rear of the Imperial lines. The spooks of the Secret Services had managed to locate the Imperial headquarters on the Rhine Front – if they struck now, maybe, just maybe, they could disorient the Imperial Army enough that the Republic forces could withdraw in something approaching good order.

That had been the plan. Judging by what they were hearing over the radio, and the utterly insane mana signatures they were detecting in the distance, however, things had clearly gone off the rails.

As soon as they had entered Imperial territory, the comprehensive mana detection arrays covering the airspace had picked them up. They had met the first group of interceptors within minutes of crossing the border, and though they had been swiftly eliminated, the Empire had clearly realized what was going on and what their objective was.

Drake's unit was the Kingdom's elite, however, each of its members descended from a long line of mages thanks to the fact the Inquisition's influence in the Kingdom had been much lesser than in the rest of Europa. They punched through the aerial mages gathered to stop them, relying on speed to reach their objective before the Empire could assemble enough numbers to overwhelm them. Even so, they still took casualties, for the Imperial mages were veterans one and all, survivors of the Rhine Front, which some were already calling the most brutal battlefield in History. They were trained, cold-blooded killers, using the very best equipment the Empire's ingenuity could provide.

At least it was daytime, so the stealth mages of the Empire shouldn't be active – unless, a little voice whispered in the back of Drake's mind, the Imperials had been bluffing all along on their capabilities precisely in case of something like this. That voice had gotten a lot more insistent when, suddenly, the Imperial mages had disengaged and withdrew, leaving them a clear path to their destination. Every single one of Drake's instincts was screaming that this was a trap, yet he'd no choice but to press on.

"What is that ?" one of his men called out as they made their final approach to the target.

A human silhouette was hovering in place in front of them. Just one, straight above their destination.

"I'm not sensing any mana signature," said Drake's second-in-command nervously, confirming what the Colonel's own senses had told him. "I thought they couldn't deploy during the day ?"

"Stay focused, men," Drake said, ignoring how the nagging voice at the back of his mind was now shouting 'I told you so'. "Even if this is one of the Empire's stealth mages, it's still just one of them, and we know he's here. Keep him in your sights and we'll prevail !"

With the help of an optic magnification spell, Drake took a closer look at the enemy. So far, the Kingdom had little to no intel about the Imperial stealth mages : anything he could glean would be priceless information in the battles to come. The Imperial mage was wearing some sort of full-body uniform, along with a gas mask, and … was he looking back at Drake ?

Slowly, as if wanting to make sure Drake could see it, the Imperial raised a small tube to his gas mask and jammed it inside some sort of mechanism. For a moment, nothing happened. Then he jerked violently, like a puppet whose strings had abruptly been pulled.

Now Drake could detect something from the stealth mage. It wasn't a mana signature : in fact, it felt very much like the opposite of that. Just trying to scan it left him feeling as if he was swimming naked in a lake in winter. He forcefully shut down the detection spell and opened his mouth to tell the rest of his unit not to try it either, when –

"EVADE !" Drake screamed without knowing why, even as he poured every bit of mana he possessed into a sudden motion away from his current position as well as reinforcing his shields as much as he could.

Something vast, black and cold passed where he had just been, and when he turned to look back, crumbling bone and dust fell in the wind, all that was left of a dozen of Albion's elite mages, slain in the span of a heartbeat because they hadn't reacted in time.

That wasn't an optic spell, or any kind of spell Drake had ever heard of. This was Death made manifest, the inexorable entropy of the universe bent to the Empire's service. Merely witnessing it left Drake feeling as if the entire world had become a colder, darker place.

Then he realized it wasn't just a feeling : the world had gotten darker, because the sun was now obscured by a thick cover of black clouds that had seemingly come out of nowhere.

Was this what the Entente had faced ? Shit. It seemed the Kingdom owed Councilor-in-exile Abensoll an apology. There was no way anyone could have stood up to that kind of nightmare.

"It's coming!" shouted someone.

A quick glance confirmed it : the Imperial mage was charging straight at them. The sight of a single mage charging over forty of the Kingdom's elites should have been ridiculous, but instead it filled Drake's heart with dread.

"Scatter !" he roared. "Don't give him grouped targets !"

His men obeyed at once, firing at the enemy mage as they did so. None of them managed to land a hit : the Imperial was too fast, his movements too random as he jerked left and right, up and down, with such suddenness he had to be using a spell to cancel out the g-forces or his bones would have been reduced to soup inside his uniform.

And then he was on them, and more men died, torn apart by close-quarters spells that definitely weren't mage blades. The air shook with screams, shouts, and the demented, bone-chilling laughter of the Imperial mage, made only more sinister by the gas mask muffling it.

*We cannot fight that monster,* Drake thought to himself as he tried and failed to lock onto the Imperial mage's position. But in front of such a display of power, his mission was even more important than ever before. By sending his unit here, the Kingdom had already committed itself to war against the Empire.

"Hold its attention," he ordered his men grimly, knowing he was signing their death warrant. "Jeffery and I are going in for the objective."

There was a series of tense, affirmative answers, and then the two of them plunged down, boosting their shields against the stream of anti-air fire that was almost immediately directed their way.

Simply blasting the Imperial forward command center wasn't enough. For one thing, there was no way to be sure that it would actually kill the people inside, given that the Imperials were sure to have fortified it as best they could. For another, even removing that forward command center wouldn't be enough to turn the tide of the battle : maybe if they'd targeted the Imperial general headquarters on the front, but Drake's superiors had been more interested in crippling the Empire's Wunderwaffen and gaining as much intel on them as possible than in helping the Republic.

Drake and Jeffery blasted their way past the guards and stormed inside the bunker, their shields and mage blades at the ready. They walked quickly through the cramped underground corridors, ready for anything – but to their surprise, they met no further resistance until reaching their destination.

A squad of soldiers had their rifles aimed at the entrance, covering a man with a Colonel's markings on his uniform. His glasses gleamed in the electric lighting, giving him a sinister aspect. Drake couldn't feel any mana from him, nor from anyone else in the room, and nobody was wearing the same uniform as the stealth mage tearing through his men in the skies above. Even so, caution stayed his hand.

From the moment he had seen the position of his target in the mission briefing, he had been worried. It was much too advanced, not quite directly on the frontlines but still far closer than any self-respecting high-ranking officer would tolerate. He couldn't think of any reason why it would be required in a modern army, which meant that in all likelihood, the bunker's position had something to do with the Wunderwaffen the man in front of him had deployed across the Rhine – weapons that had broken the Francois lines, destroyed their headquarters, and were killing his men.

The man in front of him was no ordinary man, of that he was certain.

Wait. Man ?

The briefing for this mission had contained everything the Kingdom knew about Division Y, which admittedly hadn't been very much when facts had been concerned as opposed to rumors and guesswork. But it had named one Tanya Degurechaff as the chief representative of Division Y on the Rhine Front, and the one responsible for the Arene debacle. And unless Drake was badly mistaken, 'Tanya' was a feminine name.

"You are not Tanya Degurechaff," he said, somewhat stupidly.

"A fact for which you should be grateful," replied the Colonel in slightly accented Albish. "The Major has far less tolerance for fools than I."

"'Major' ?" Drake quickly recovered from his shock, his mental gears whirling. "So you are her superior then. Even better. You will be coming with us, Colonel. We have lots of questions for you about the Wunderwaffen and Division Y. Come quietly and there's no need for your subordinates to die."

The Colonel chuckled, looking supremely unimpressed and completely unworried. Drake's worries intensified.

"If you think I'd tell you anything of value, then you really are a fool. But then again, what else should I expect given the reason for your presence here ? A surprise attack on our rear, while we are engaged with another foe, without even the courtesy of a formal declaration of war after all this time spent scuttling in the shadow supporting our enemies. I suppose this is the true face of the Allied Kingdom : a hyena wearing a gentleman's mask. Do you have any idea what your presence here will mean for your country ? For the world ?"

"You will have all the time to explain that to me later," Drake promised, concealing his anger at the Colonel's insults to his homeland.

The man's face contorted into a grimace that was the very picture of Imperial contempt.

"No, I don't think I will. You should have stayed on your island. Sergeant ? Open fire."

Drake felt Jeffery tense at his side, but the two held their ground. They had kept their shields up the entire time : they could've survived an artillery shell, so no mere infantry squad was going to take them down – wait. Those guns weren't like any Imperial model he knew of –

Once again, Drake's instincts saved his life, as he moved just in time to avoid being struck in the chest by the beams of cerulean light that erupted from the muzzles of the soldiers' weapons instead of bullets. His second-in-command wasn't so lucky, and the Albish Colonel watched in horror as the lower half of Jeffery's body fell to the ground, everything above his waist having vanished, along with a good chunk of the cave wall behind him.

Then the horrific pain hit him, and he realized that he hadn't completely dodged the attack either. His right arm was gone under the elbow, and a chunk of his left hip was missing. At least the wounds were cauterized so he wouldn't bleed out, but he still almost passed out from the pain. Fortunately, he managed to fire a mental boosting spell just in time, blocking out the agony long enough to activate his flight and protective spells at maximum, and burst out of the bunker before the soldiers could fire their fey weapons again. He might have been able to kill them with an attack spell before they shot, but that was a risk he couldn't afford to take. Perhaps it was just the terror of being faced with so many things he didn't understand talking, but Drake was convinced trying to attack would have resulted in his death, and the Kingdom needed to know what he'd discovered.

As he made his way back to the skies, he sensed the pitifully few remaining mana signatures of his unit, and screamed at them to retreat. A couple flew towards him, picking him up and carrying him away as the rest covered their flight : shamefully, he was too in shock from the pain (which was beginning to pierce through the mental doping) to protest. Despite their losses, his men retreated in good order, and he felt a twinge of pride at their discipline, coupled with the sorrow of knowing so many of them wouldn't make it home.

Before he passed out, the last thing Drake heard was the demented laughter of the monster who had cut his troops to pieces, a sound that would follow him in his nightmares for many nights to come, along with the image of a bespectacled Imperial Colonel calmly facing him despite all his magical prowess before ordering his death, illuminated by blue light that passed through mage shields as if they weren't there.

---

*May 26th, 1925 – Imperial Central Command Bunker on the Rhine Front*

Sergeant Barchet, originally attached to the Eastern Army before his transfer to Division Y, sighed in relief as the foreign mage disappeared into the sky. That had been close. The M-912 rifle had many good points, but its rate of fire was frankly appalling : it took several seconds after every shot before it could be fired again. Usually his squad would fire in turns to keep the target suppressed, but with a pair of enemy mages in close proximity, overwhelming them before they had a chance to react had seemed like the safer option.

It had been a gamble, but after the time he and his men had spent as security for Castle Schwartzstein, it would take more than a pair of enemy mages to frighten them. After all, the best thing about this assignment was that, even if the living conditions were miserable, the only inhuman monstrosities on the field were on their side … well, most of them anyway. At least he hadn't needed to fight an Eikon himself. That wouldn't have been fun, given what he'd read in the reports he'd been given access to before leaving the castle.

At first, the Major had been about to send one of Projekt P along with the Endlose Nacht. But while the lieutenant had a healthy respect for the abilities of Professor Gehrman's 'friends', he had managed to convince the Major that Colonel Lergen probably didn't need the additional stress of dealing with another breed of supersoldier on top of everything else he already had going on.

The look the Major had given him had been nothing short of horrified, as if she was shocked she hadn't realized that herself.

And speaking of Colonel Lergen, he really ought to check he was okay now that they were in the clear.

"Colonel, are you alright ?"

"I am fine. Thank you for your assistance, sergeant." Lergen turned to the radio officers, who were emerging from their hiding places. "Report !"

"The Albish mages are disengaging !" one of them called out after a moment. "Our observers on the surface tell us the Untote is pursuing them. We have ten, eleven … twelve enemy

magical signatures left – correct that, eleven, one of them just went down."

"Out of an initial, what, fifty that made it through our defensive screens ?" The Colonel sighed. "That wasn't even close to a fair fight, was it. Don't bother trying to recall our friend in the air – let him have his fun. What about the Eikon situation ?"

"Hard to say, sir. None of the Untoten are responding to calls at the moment. But from what the units on the ground are reporting, they appear to be winning."

"Any losses among the Untoten ?"

"None reported so far, but again, that's hard to tell."

Unfortunately, that probably wouldn't last. Division Y's supersoldiers had been very lucky so far, helped by their unusual gifts and the Major's absolutely ruthless training (even Barchet, who had gone through the standard Imperial drilling procedures, shuddered at the memory of what that child-looking terror had made them go through before judging them ready for deployment). But every streak of luck ended eventually, and from the sound of things, what the Untoten had gained in power thanks to Endlose Nacht they had paid for in discipline. Against enemy mages, that might still be alright, as the one who had stayed behind to cover the headquarters had proven, but against monsters like the Eikons ? Now that was another story.

"Well, I knew the risks when I gave them the serum," Lergen sighed. "Let's move, gentlemen. We are too exposed out here with that hole in the roof."

Barchet nodded in approval, and they all started to move, one of the aides rushing to pick up the map with the pinned positions of known units.

"You know, sir," he told the Colonel as they moved through the tunnels towards the secondary command post, "the John Bulls are going to make some assumptions about you when they get back home."

He wouldn't have used the slur commonly used to describe the people of Albion before. But they were at war with the Kingdom now, so it was practically his soldiery duty to mock the Albish at every opportunity so long as it didn't lead to underestimating them or forgetting that most of the poor bastards on the other side didn't have any more of a choice in their whole situation than he did.

"Hmm ?" Lergen asked, distracted. "What do you mean ?"

"Well, the way you talked to that mage, didn't it seem like he thought you were the Major's superior within the ranks of Division Y, not just as a member of the Central Headquarters ?"

"Oh. Oh." The Colonel paled, a pained expression on his face. "You really think they …"

"Seems likely to me," Barchet shrugged. "I'm no Intelligence expert, of course, but you were the one who came to check on the Major after Arene, and then you took command of the Division's assets on the Rhine. And it was only after that the Untoten got access to Endlose

Nacht. *And* you were protected by us and our guns. I think it paints a rather clear picture, don't you ?"

The look on the Colonel's face kept getting worse as Barchet talked. Frankly, considering how calmly he'd looked when he had faced the pair of Albish mages, the contrast was more than a little amusing, but Barchet kept his own expression carefully neutral. After all, this was a man the Major herself respected. And even if Barchet was pretty sure he'd been bluffing while facing the John Bulls, it still took balls to stand up to two aerial mages and throw their country's behavior in their faces.

Yes, Colonel Eric von Lergen was definitely a man worth having on the side of Division Y at the Imperial Army's Central Headquarters. He could see why the Major had gone against protocol and sent him and his men to ensure he got through this whole mess in one piece.

---

*"The M-912 rifle (commonly called 'raygun' after the Director's nickname for it spread through the ranks of the troops wielding it) is a marvel of Imperial engineering combined with the properties of Elder sorcery. It can also be considered the Division's greatest work at adapting the potential of a Projekt to a smaller scale, as it is a derivative of Projekt M, [Mjölnir].*

*Although the exact mechanisms of the M-912 are complex (see report M-912-Gamma for the detailed explanation and schematics), its basic workings are relatively simple. At the core of each M-912 is a blue crystal no larger than a fingernail : upon pressing the trigger, a small electrical current (using a standard Imperial battery) is sent through it, resulting in a burst of energy that is then channelled through the use of small, specifically-prepared mirrors into a single beam that leaves the barrel in a straight line.*

*Careful training in handling the M-912 is required for several reasons. First, the weapon requires specific maintenance. Secondly, getting used to a recoilless rifle with a light speed projectile takes some practice even for the most seasoned of marksman. Finally, the M-912 is far more destructive than even the most overpowered sniper rifle : if the wielder isn't careful, a great amount of collateral damage can happen very quickly. Attempts to modulate the beam's destructive power to create different settings have all failed, and a single shot of the M-912 can pierce straight through a tank, although its energy dissipate quickly in the air, limiting its effective range to around a hundred meters.*

*Despite these limitations, the M-912 has seen great use within Division Y since its development, as its superior firepower to all equivalent conventional weaponry allows the soldiers assigned to the Division to face the results of failed experiments and contain and suppress them with great efficiency. No natural armor has proven able to resist it, and even differently corporeal entities can be damaged by its beam. Of course, the vagaries of combat mean that the M-912s are frequently damaged, and the entire production line is presently dedicated to maintaining the current stock.*

*While the process could potentially be industrialized in order to provide hundreds or even thousands of M-912 rifles to the Imperial Army, the Director has vetoed any increase in production. According to her, beyond the comparative frailty of the weapon and the need for extensive training to know how to maintain it properly, it is much more expensive than*

*standard rifles while also being grossly overkill and short-ranged for use by the common soldier. She has also taken note of the strange readings that occur when multiple crystals are in close proximity to each other, and how industrializing the process would require storage of greater quantities of the material, which would have, in her own words, 'unforeseen and most dire consequences'. Even the small quantities produced for the use of Division Y's soldiers are kept in separate vaults behind thick metal walls."*

Excerpt from an internal Division Y memo concerning the M-912 rifle, April 6th, 1924.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Untoten most of the time : horror movie monsters weaponized for modern warfare, but unfaillingly polite and respectful.
Untoten under the effect of the Endlose Nacht : I HAVE THE POWER OF THE MAJOR AND ANIME ON MY SIDE !

Lergen when facing all but certain death by enemy mage : Come at me, bro.
Lergen when facing the prospect of being associated with Division Y in the eyes of enemy Intelligence : Oh God oh no.

Welp, over eight thousand words written in four days. Apparently you people are still sacrificing goats to the Muse to fuel this story's writing. At least I hope it's just goats.

I know I said the Francois arc would end in this chapter, but I ended up having to cut it in two. While this chapter described the Battle of the Rhine, next one will be about its aftermath and how the war will change following the Empire's victory on that front.

An anonymous reader pointed out that I should go with Projekt P as Lergen's guard because Tanya's message mentioned "a bodyguard", singular (along with other, more narrative-driven reasons that made a lot of sense but that the Muse told me to ignore, sorry). That one is on me : in my head, I was thinking of "a bodyguard" as a singular units, like "a guard of elite warriors" is singular while referring to multiple people. Or does that not work in English ? Eh, you get what I mean. I have said it before and I'll say it again: the kind of absurd speed at which I'm writing this story comes at a cost when it comes to little details like this one.

Barchet is a canon LN character, who shows up in volume 7. He is a Second Lieutenant there, but I assumed he got promoted by fighting on the Eastern Front and was still a sergeant at the time of his transfert to Division Y. And yes, certain other canon mages were also transferred to Castle Schwartzstein from the Eastern and Central Armies. They are just busy helping with research and security back at the Division's HQ.

As always, this chapter was finished in a state of semi-trance, so please tell me if you see any typos that eluded me.

The support on this story has been phenomenal, so thank you all for that. If you have suggestions for new Projekte, tactical utilizations or recommendations for the strategic and geopolitical sides of things, don't hesitate to tell me in the comments/reviews : they, along with the dark sacrifices, are what fuel the writing of this story.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*ANGELIC WARRIORS FLY TO THE REPUBLIC'S RESCUE !*

*Early this morning, the citizens of our fair city still out and about were graced with the most wondrous sight : a flock of angelic figures flying through the skies of Parisee (see photograph above). Upon questioning those awe-struck witnesses, we learned that these holy warriors took flight from the Cathedral of Our Beloved Lady, emerging from its gates in ordered rows before taking to the skies.*

*Reached for comment, the Archbishop of Our Beloved Lady was unavailable. A source close to the Ministry of Defense, however, told us that these angelic beings are known as 'Holy Knights', and are the Republic's answer to the long-standing rumors of Imperial monsters being deployed on the Rhine Front.*

*At the same time, reinforcements assembled by Vice-Minister De Lugo on the outskirts of our capital has also set off for the Rhine Front. With such blessed warriors on the side of the Republic, surely victory against the evil hordes of the Empire is finally at hand. Already the brave citizens of Arene have crippled its supply lines, forcing it to stop in its track : now the hammer of righteous justice will fall and break them once and for all !*

Excerpt from the front-page of La Flamme de Parisee, special morning edition, May 26th, 1925.

---

*SPECTACULAR IMPERIAL VICTORY MARRED BY ALBISH PERFIDY !*

*Yesterday, a great victory was won by the Imperial Army on the Rhine Front, where the forces of our Reich have clashed with those of the Republic for months, at a terrible cost in lives for both sides. Through a combination of genius tactics and the deployment of a new Wunderwaffe to destroy the Francois headquarters, the Imperial Army succeeded in breaking the deadlock that consumed the lives of hundreds of thousands of young men – only for the Republic to respond by unleashing its own superweapons, the very same ones which nearly laid waste to Arene, as we've now learned from our contacts in the city as travel to and from it opens up once more.*

*According to our sources in the Imperial Army, early estimates indicate that these weapons, currently named 'Eikons' due to their grotesque attempt at imitating angels, killed nearly as many Republican soldiers as they did Imperial ones once they reached the battlefield. Even so, they were no match for the Empire's own superior magically-enhanced supersoldiers, who brought them down and ended their murderous rampage – though not without taking casualties of their own for the first time in the War.*

*Exhausted, surrounded, cut off from the chain of command and having witnessed their comrades slain by the hundred by the very warriors they were told would deliver them, the Francois soldiers did the only thing they could, and surrendered. An exact count of the dead and captured has yet to be announced, but it is certain that tens of thousands of Republican soldiers will require accommodations in the Empire's prison camps in the immediate future, even as the Imperial Army now prepares to march onto Parisee and demand the Francois government's surrender.*

*And yet, despite all of this, and the many sacrifices made by our brave soldiers, peace is still a distant dream. For at the last hour of what should have been the final battle of the Great War, the Allied Kingdom decided to strike, unprovoked and unannounced. Without even sending a formal declaration of war, two entire battalions of Albish aerial mages crossed the border and flew over the Rhine, striking down several Imperial mages on their way to attack our Army's headquarters.*

*Given the state of the battle at the time, all such a strike would've achieved would be delaying the inevitable, resulting in still more losses of life on both sides. But thankfully, they were stopped in their tracks by a single Imperial supersoldier held in reserve precisely for such an occurrence, and their attempt to push through regardless was thwarted by the valor of our soldiers, led by the battlefield commander Colonel Eric von Lergen, who is rumored to have faced the leader of the Albish mages himself, denouncing the Kingdom's actions before forcing him to flight.*

*Such a cowardly course of action shouldn't come at a surprise for anyone who has studied the Allied Kingdom's history. For such has always been Albion's policy : to pit the powers of Europa against one another, using borrowed blades to bleed us all dry so that none can challenge Albion's oversea empire, built on ruthless conquest and exploitation of the locals ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, May 27th, 1925.

---

*NEW PRIME MINISTER CHURBULL ISSUES WAR DECLARATION IN IMPASSIONED SPEECH TO PARLIAMENT !*

*For a long time, we of the Allied Kingdom have watched with growing concern as the Empire's expansionist ambitions devoured country after country. Now, through cruel and underhanded means, the Empire has defeated the Francois Republic's army, forcing its leaders to choose between ignoble surrender or annihilation by their terrible Wunderwaffen. All analysts we've reached are in agreement : the final defeat of the Republic is near.*

*Knowing that this would leave the Empire as unquestioned master of Europa, our Kingdom's government has called for unity in the name of preventing this grim future from coming to pass. As the newly nominated Prime Minister Churbull said in his speech to Parliament : 'If the Empire is not stopped, then a new and terrible age shall dawn upon Europa, illuminated by the fell light of evil magicks bent to serve the Kaiser's all-consuming ambition'.*

*In related news, the Under-Secretary of the War Office stepped down, taking full responsibility for the intervention of the Aerial Mage Forces to the Rhine ahead of the*

*declaration of war. In his resignation speech, he claimed to have acted on his own 'in the interests of the Kingdom', hoping that the mages would be able to 'prevent the complete encirclement and destruction of the Republican Army', willingly bearing the dishonor of attacking before the declaration of war for the good of the Kingdom. He'll be consigned to his residence in Londinium until his fate can be decided by a military tribunal ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Londinium Times, May 28th, 1925.

---

*IMPERIAL ARMY ROLLS INTO PARISEE, REPUBLICAN PRESIDENT SURRENDERS !*

*Yesterday, after a final confrontation with the pitifully small reserve forces the Republic had hurled at them in a vain attempt at delaying the inevitable, the Imperial Army reached and entered the capital o f the Francois Republic. The situation there was in a state of some confusion, as news of their army's defeat had been suppressed by the state and all kind of wild rumors circulated, most of them related to the Eikons dispatched to the front four days prior.*

*In the end, however, the nightmare scenario of urban warfare within the streets of Parisee was adverted as the Francois President (whose role in the Republic is similar to that of our own Chancellor as chief of the executive branch of government) made a speech broadcast all across the city.*

*In his speech, the Francois President acknowledged the defeat of the Republican Army, and laid the blame for the disaster at the foot of General De Lugo, Vice-Minister of Defense and the Armed Forces. The President claimed it was De Lugo who gave the order to deploy Francois' own superweapons, developed in a program apparently so secret its existence was concealed from the President himself, despite being unable to control them.*

*A cynical mind might look at the Francois President's speech and note that it was carefully worded to imply the defeat was entirely due to the Eikons' lack of reliability without every stating it outright, thus preserving the pride of the Republic. But the most important part of that speech was a formal surrender of the Republic in its war against the Empire, and a request to all citizens to remain peaceful as peace negotiations began and Parisee itself was occupied by the Imperial Army.*

*The discussions concerning the terms of the Francois surrender are presently ongoing. At the same time, efforts to find the disgraced De Lugo and bring him to justice have yet to succeed ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, June 1st, 1925.

---

*"... Now is the time to break free of the lies that have kept us chained for so long, to reject the great illusion that war can in any way benefit our nation. As our brothers and sisters in Arene learned first-hand, war between countries is a foolish pursuit, serving no purpose except to stroke the pride of those in power ...*

*... Is this defeat humiliating ? Yes, undeniably so. The sting of it burns, and will continue to do so for years and decades to come. But we must not give in to our primitive impulses. It was fear of the Empire that drove our government to join the war, and we all saw what came from it : hatred must not now take the place of fear ...*

*... already so many sons of Francois have perished, but for the sake of those who yet live and those yet to be born, we must make peace. We need not forget, or even forgive, but we must end this bloody cycle of revenge ..."*

Excerpts from a pamphlet found across Parisee, titled La Véritée (also the name of a newspaper whose publication was stopped by the Francois government soon after the onset of the Great War due to 'unpatriotic and treasonous allegations'), May 30th, 1925.

---

*"Francois will never surrender to the Imperial beast !"*

*"Fight back against the acolytes of Hell !"*

*"The Republic will never fall !"*

*"God is with us ! DEUS IO VULT !"*

*"Parisee stands !"*

Various graffitis found on the walls of buildings in Parisee following the Republic's formal surrender.

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : Status Report

Date : June 1st, 1925

*Brigadier General,*

*Three of the ten instances of Projekt U deployed on the Rhine Front were lost during the fight with the Eikons. I would appreciate your support for the decorations I have recommended them for in light of their ultimate sacrifice for the Reich. All remaining instances of Projekt U have been recalled to Castle Schwartzstein for debriefing and examination. I remind you that we do not yet know the long-term effects of using the Endlose Nacht serum, nor what effects on their biology exposure to the Eikon's blood might have. Therefore, I respectfully advise against deploying these instances again until we've finished this line of investigation. The instances who remained at Castle Schwartzstein and weren't deployed to the Rhine Front should be kept in reserve in case the Eikons are located.*

*The materials recovered from the Albish attack have been received, and preparations are ongoing to create new instances of Projekt U to replace the losses sustained by the Projekt*

*from them. However, even if the process goes exactly as planned and there are no complications, it will still take several months for the new instances to be satisfyingly combat-ready.*

*While Projekt W took no losses, its instances have also been recalled in order to check the impact of prolonged battle as well as to provide treatment for injuries beyond their natural ability to recover from. Again, I would appreciate your support for the commendations I have submitted for them due to their exemplary performance on the Rhine Front.*

*Along with the support to the investigation into the source of the Eikons, a team has been dispatched to secure the former site of the Republican command center. I am aware of the strategic value of the documents to be found within, but I once again strongly advise against sending anyone not affiliated with Division Y within the fortress for the time being. Projekt V is one of the most dangerous Wunderwaffen designed by Division Y, and I do not believe the present state of the Republic justifies risking the mental and physical health of ill-prepared men.*

*Agent E and the Imperial soldiers who witnessed the engagement between Projekt U and the Eikons have both arrived to Castle Schwartzstein and are currently being debriefed before being sent through our training course. With the Kingdom openly joining the war and given the recent signs that our lines of communication have been penetrated (by which I mean the Eclipsed Liberation event at Arene and the attempted decapitating strike on the Rhine), I intend to use the former to review and enhance our counter-espionage measures. The latter will be added to our pool of guards and all-purpose infantry, which is ever more needed as the Division's activities increase in scale thank to our additional funding.*

*Finally, please pass on my compliments to Colonel Lergen. His leadership of the Division's assets was impeccable. You might, however, find it useful to discuss his confrontation with the Albish mages with him, as what his bodyguards have reported to me seems like it might have worrying implications in the future.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*June 2nd, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

Brigadier Generals Zettour and Rudersdorf, who after the triumphant success of Operation Shock & Awe could well be considered the most influential men in the Empire, were meeting within one of the many sound-proofed rooms of the Central Headquarters. A pile of documents was spread out on the table between them, around a nearly-overflowing ashtray.

"We were so close to ending the war," bemoaned Rudersdorf, holding his head in his hands. The two of them were alone : there was no need to keep up the facade he presented to the rest of the staff at Central Headquarters. "What the hell were the Albish thinking ?!"

"Their official position is that this was all their War Office's Under-Secretary's doing," replied Zettour with a straight face, pointing at one of the documents. "The rest of them had nothing to do with it."

Rudersdorf scoffed, and muttered something that would've had his old nanny box his ear is she had heard him say it.

"Of all the self-serving bollocks … Do they really expect us to believe that ?!"

"I am certain they don't," answered Zettour with a wry smile. "But we aren't the intended audience : their own population is. If their not-so-little raid had succeeded, the public would praise them for such a keen tactical move, but failure is much less forgivable."

That much was an axiom of warfare and politics. Zettour didn't doubt the Under-Secretary had been involved in sending the unit of aerial mages to intervene in the Rhine, but the notion that he might have done so without the approval of his superior was laughable for anyone with even the slightest inkling of how militaries worked and how valuable such units were.

"They are accusing us of having always had expansionist ambitions, can you believe that ?" Rudersdorf scoffed while picking up a news clipping from the Kingdom before tossing it aside. "Utter nonsense. Our entire military doctrine of internal lines is predicated on us fighting defensive wars. The push toward Parisee alone showed us just how much extending our supply lines hurts our ability to fight."

Zettour nearly winced at the memory. As the one responsible for arranging the logistics of the advance, he was all too aware of how difficult the entire thing had been. If the Francois reinforcements they had intercepted on the way to the enemy capital hadn't been thrown into near-complete chaos by the news filtering from the front, dealing with them would've been much more difficult. Fortunately, knowing that their main army had been crushed and that the 'Holy Knights' which had flown ahead had been defeated after a disastrous deployment had broken their resolve.

"You cannot deny that such ambitions do exist within the Reich," Zettour pointed out. "You and I may be perfectly content with securing the Fatherland's current borders, but dreams of conquest are widespread across both the civilian and military population."

"More the former than the latter, I'd wager," grunted Rudersdorf.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, old friend. It's not like it has been so long since the Empire expanded to its current size." Both the Republic and the Empire still had many veterans of the last time they'd clashed within their ranks, after all.

"We are not going to annex the Entente and the Republic," said Rudersdorf forcefully. "That would be beyond foolish. We might be able to absorb Dacia, and we'll definitely settle the question of Norden in our favor once and for all. Maybe we'll get a few of the more valuable and less troublesome colonies from the Republic too while we're at it. But anything more would be foolish. Surely even the most rabid patriot can understand that !"

"I am not saying they don't," Zettour placated his choleric friend. "I am saying that presenting the Empire in that light abroad sounds all too plausible, and propaganda can work with far less than that. Keep in mind, the Albish have managed to convince their population that they are beacons of Enlightenment while at the same time maintaining the world's largest colonial

empire, so they are old hands at convincing the masses to ignore blatant contradictions and lies in the state's speeches."

Zettour probably wasn't being fair to the Allied Kingdom. But then again, he didn't particularly feel like being fair to the Albish at the moment. Their little stunt had almost cost them Colonel Lergen, who had indirectly given them Major Degurechaff and all of Division Y, and had cost them the lives of far too many aerial mages. A few of the bodies had been recovered in a good enough state to be shipped off to Castle Schwartzstein, but that was poor consolation.

"The Albish cannot hope to win a land war against us alone, and that's without taking Division Y into account once they have recovered from their efforts on the Rhine." Privately, Zettour doubted the Division needed much time at all, but he understood why the Major might want to limit the Imperial Army's reliance on the Wunderwaffen, so he'd play along for now. "I doubt they will even try until they can get someone else to join in. Their Navy, however, is another matter entirely."

"A blockade then, you reckon ?" Rudersdorf said, frowning.

"It seems the most likely option," nodded Zettour. "They'll try to starve our economy and keep us from landing our own forces on their mainland while their diplomats search for allies and their spies search for information on the Wunderwaffen. We might also see a few aerial probes and naval raids."

"You know, between Arene and now this, I'm wondering what the hell our own counter-espionage folks are doing," grumbled Rudersdorf. "Do you think they could manage to get into Castle Schwartzstein itself, though ?"

Zettour smiled mirthlessly. "If they do, then I'm certain they'll get exactly what they deserve. But I'm confident Major Degurechaff is aware of the danger and taking all necessary precautions. Out of all of us, she's the one most worried about what she described as a 'Mythos proliferation scenario'."

"'Mythos' ?" queried Rudersdorf.

"Hmm ? Oh, right. Something the Major said once in one of our conversations while referring to Division Y's work. It stuck with me."

"Well, I suppose it does have a bit more gravitas than 'Elder sorcery'," Rudersdorf admitted. "Still, given what happened in Francois, isn't that scenario already inevitable ?"

"Not necessarily. It really seems like De Lugo was the one running the entire Eikon program without telling anyone. I can understand why : many of the Republican mages who were converted into Eikons were members of influential families, and they aren't exactly pleased with their sons being experimented upon and turned into lunatics. We're still investigating, but it seems the whole thing is quite recent – like it didn't start until after Arene, in fact, with the ones Degurechaff fought there being the prototypes, so to speak."

"Our enemies just happened to stumble on something like that, even though it took months for Division Y to get anywhere with their Projekte ?" asked Rudersdorf, his scepticism evident. "That seems a little too convenient to me."

"I understand and share your doubts," Zettour assured his colleague. "The Major has sent a team to assist the investigation in Parisee on that matter. We will have to wait and see what they find, and hope that no more Eikons pop up." He grimaced. "Well, apart from the one who escaped the Rhine."

Despite the … commendable enthusiasm of the Untoten, not all of Francois' mad creations had been slain. Near the end of the battle, half of the handful of survivors had abruptly departed while the other half sacrificed themselves to keep the Untoten busy. The sight of their departure had convinced the last Republican hold-outs to join the overwhelming majority of their fellows and surrender, although if Zettour had read between the lines of the field reports' correctly, a suspicious number of 'accidental fire incidents' had occurred within the ranks of these units beforehand.

The Brigadier General didn't blame them. An officer who didn't value the lives of the men under his command was no officer at all.

"We still don't know where they vanished to ?" asked Rudersdorf. Zettour shook his head.

"Once they left the range of our detection arrays, they were gone," he explained. "Given how they left, they must've had a destination in mind, but so far, nothing. Of course, it's only been a few days."

"And they aren't exactly stealthy," continued Rudersdorf. "Alright, let's table that particular problem for now. With how dishonourably the Kingdom has acted, there's going to be a lot of pressure on us to strike back. What do you suggest ?"

"Well, we'll need to talk with the Navy, that's for sure. Unless you're talking about Division Y ?"

Rudersdorf shook his head. "No. We can't fight a war depending solely on the Wunderwaffen. For now, let's limit ourselves to more conventional means, and keep Division Y as a back-up plan for emergencies … at least until we're sure to have plugged our security leaks. If we're lucky and the Eikons were a fluke, then the absolutely last thing the Empire, no, the world needs, is this 'Mythos proliferation scenario'. Really, anything that worries that girl is something to be very cautious of."

"On that," Zettour grimaced at the thought of what that kind of world might look like, "we are very much agreed."

---

*"The quarantine around Arene ended when the Empire had to focus its efforts on reach Parisee and needed all its personnel to support the logistical efforts of such an advance into foreign territory. Thanks to this, we've been able to enter the city, and what we found was quite disturbing.*

*By and large, the people of Arene blame the Republic for the battle that took place in the city, which they call the 'Eclipsed Liberation'. We now know that the operation wasn't conducted solely by Republican aerial mages, but was in fact spearheaded by the first 'Eikon' supersoldiers, which started the uprising by attacking the train station, where the intelligence we'd provided the Republic told them a new Wunderwaffe would be delivered.*

*We believe that the Wunderwaffe brought to Arene was the one later responsible for the destruction of the Republican Army's headquarters, and that it wasn't expended in repelling the attack on Arene as was previously thought. Instead, the defeat of the uprising can be laid at the feet of a new, never-encountered type of supersoldier that the locals have taken to calling the Lady of Stars.*

*Included with this report are painted pictures of the Lady of Stars, which fought the twelve Eikons who participated in the attack and handily defeated them, killing their leader on the steps of the Kalerian Cathedral and forcing the survivors to flight. As they fought, the very skies above Arene looked like a star-filled night sky (despite the attack taking place in the middle of the day), with what the citizens of Arene refer to as an 'alien moon' shining directly above the city.*

*During their running battle across Arene against the Lady of Stars, the Eikons were as careless with their shots as they're reported to have been on the Rhine Front, which partly accounts for the citizens' new distrust of the Republic.*

*Only partly, however, and thus we get to the more disturbing aspect of what we found in Arene. It seems that a cult of some sort has taken root in the city. They call themselves the Path of Stars, and they were eager to speak about what happened during the failed Republican operation as well as their beliefs with us when they thought us to be mere civilians from out of town.*

*The Path of Stars are firmly opposed to the war, even to the very concept of nations, believing all humans to be born equal and deserving of the same respect. The conviction with which they speak of this is disturbing : they look like fanatics having experienced religious rapture more than people who were convinced by Imperial propaganda or even persuaded through logical arguments. They also seem to regard the Lady of Stars as a prophet of sorts, and assigned the end of hostilities between the Empire and the Republic due to the latter's capitulation to her influence.*

*While there is no concrete evidence of this, we believe that Tanya Degurechaff, whose presence at the train station we managed to confirm, might be the 'civilian identity', so to speak, of the Lady of Stars. Attached to this report are also the conclusions of our investigation into Tanya Degurechaff, who we now believe to be an early instance of human-shaped Wunderwaffe, similar to the 'Devils of the Rhine' and the Imperial stealth mages, albeit one much more powerful – as even the stealth mages struggled to fight the Eikons during the final battle of the Rhine, whereas the Lady of Stars overcame twelve on her own. The possibility that she possesses some kind of mind-altering ability also cannot be discounted, as we find it hard to believe a city as wrought by anti-Imperial sentiment as Arene was would change its tune so quickly and suddenly."*

Excerpt from the report of Agent 404, Albion Secret Service, June 2nd, 1925.

*June 4th, 1925 – Londinium*

The mood in the room where the Round Table met was one of mixed dread and exhaustion. None of the men present had slept well in the last few days, and it showed. Keeping the Kingdom from falling apart in the wake of the Republic's collapse and their own disastrous attempt at turning the tide of battle on the Rhine Front had taken its toll. But they all endured it and didn't mention it to one another.

They had thrown Kay's second-in-command under the metaphorical bus in order to keep things stable on the home front, but that had mostly been for the public's benefit in order to maintain trust in the Kingdom's military prowess. Behind closed doors, it had taken a lot more work to form a coalition willing to formally declare war against the Empire – and, more importantly, work together for the duration of that conflict. The fear of the Empire establishing a Wunderwaffen-enforced hegemony over the entire continent hadn't been enough in itself : Mordred in particular looked half-dead from all the secret deals, cashed-in favors, threats and outright bribery that had been needed to keep the vast and complicated machine of the Allied Kingdom from breaking apart at such a critical juncture.

They had considered avoiding declaring war, even if it would have meant eating crow and discreetly making reparations to the Empire. The Imperial Army was doubtlessly already weary of conflict, so that should have been possible, and would have given the Kingdom more time to ply its spycraft in order to learn the secrets of the Wunderwaffen. But doing so would have been the equivalent of formally crowning the Empire as the continental hegemon the Kingdom had feared for centuries. The Republic and the Entente would end up firmly under the Empire's influence, Dacia would most likely be formally integrated to the Empire, and anyone who thought the Reich would stop advancing its Wunderwaffen program further in times of peace was an idiot. No, the only chance for the Allied Kingdom to achieve its goals was to strike now, while the Imperial Army was still off-balance from being spread out across the three countries it had defeated.

None of them thought it would be easy. For the first time in years, the Kingdom found itself fighting a war where it was definitely the underdog. Nevertheless, they would push on. Full-scale mobilization had begun on the mainland, and the colonial governors were being pressured for resources and manpower. Nor were their efforts limited to their borders : in the Southern Continent, agents were at work stirring trouble within the Republican colonies, whispering into the ears of the generals who had been exiled there that now was the time for them to claim glory by refusing to bend the knee to the Imperial invaders of the mainland. And all across the world, their diplomats were trying to gather support against the Empire, using a combination of propaganda and backroom deals.

"Well, this is a fine mess we've gotten ourselves into," said Mordred, breaking the gloomy silence. "I don't suppose there is any chance that the Francois will keep on fighting to the bitter end to keep their nation free of foreign tyrants despite their President's speech ?"

"If you're talking about the population as a whole, then absolutely not," replied Agravain. "De Lugo was the face of the war for most Francois. Now that he is gone, and with a scandal

like this atop such a crushing military defeat, the fighting spirit has been punched out of the Republic's leadership."

"Surely there'll be some resistance, though ?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. But the Empire's diplomats aren't idiots. The terms they offered to the Republic are, frankly speaking, almost insultingly reasonable. Formal recognition of the Republic's responsibility in escalating the war with their surprise attack on the Rhine, disarmament of most of its troops, occupation of military bases until the end of hostilities – which would've been much sooner if not for us – along with the seizure of their stockpiles of war materials … Oh, and the discussion of a demilitarized zone being established on the border on the Francois side, with the details to be decided in the future. It isn't nothing by any means, but they are in a position to ask for a lot more, and it's not like the Republic would have any choice but to comply."

"So the civilians won't rise up in hordes to throw out the Imperials, and the Imperials won't be stupid enough to cause a massacre and give them a reason to in the first place," said Mordred. "And the Republican Army is out for the count. What about their Navy ? They got the ships of the Entente after Legadonia fell, didn't they ? What are they doing ?"

"The combined Francois fleet was massing at the port of Brest, probably in the hope of being ready to join us to face the Imperial Navy when we joined the war openly," answered Agravain. "The majority of the ships left anchor before the surrender was signed and are now operating on their own : some of them are on their way to us, others are moving to the Francois colonies. Those that remained will be seized by the Empire as part of the terms of surrender soon."

"We can't allow that," said Kay immediately. "The Imperial Navy is far from being ours' match, but we have too many commitments across the globe. If they seize the Republic's ships, they might have enough of a fleet to threaten our homeland."

"We could attack and sink the ships in the harbor, but that's not a decision to make lightly," warned Agravain. "For one thing, it would turn a vast part of the Republic against us. And in any case, it's out of our hands now. Prime Minister Churbull will have to make that call."

"Ah, right. Mordred, did you manage to meet him ?"

"Yes. Prime Minister Churbull has been briefed about what little we know of the Empire's Wunderwaffen and Division Y, and I made sure he knew he could rely on our support as he guides the country through this crisis."

"What was his reaction ?"

"Well, he didn't tell us to start ratifying our unconditional surrender to the Empire, so all in all, pretty good I'd say." Mordred sighed. "Joking aside, he takes the threat of Imperial hegemony as seriously as any of us. And now that we know the Francois managed to develop their own supersoldiers, even if they fucked it up, he wants us to get into the game as well. So we'll have his support in our efforts to learn more about Division Y's activities at least. Speaking of that, how is Isaac doing ?"

"He will live," grunted Kay. "But he won't ever get back to the battlefield. He is planning to retire as the head of the Drake family and have his nephew William take over. Still, he told me everything he could, including the things that didn't make it into the official report."

"Indeed. And combined with what we've learned of the events in Arene, this is all quite … confusing," said Agravain, showing quite the mastery of understatement.

The strike by Drake's mage unit had been aimed at keeping the Republic in the fight, but also at gaining any possible intelligence on Division Y and its Wunderwaffen. While that side of the mission certainly couldn't be called a complete success, it wasn't a complete failure either. They had learned a lot about the capabilities of the Empire's stealth mages, for instance : prior to this, nobody had any idea that they could forego stealth in exchange for a massive boost in their combat potential – so massive, it let just one of them take on an entire wing of elite aerial mages and win. There had to be some sort of cost for that, otherwise the Imperial flag would have flown over Parisee months ago, but what it was, they'd no idea.

Then, of course, there was what had happened within the command bunker. The knowledge that the Imperials apparently had guns that could pierce right through a mage's protective shield had been yet another unwelcome revelation. Combined with the report they'd received about Arene and the discussion between Drake and the enemy commander, they'd been forced to review all that they'd assumed about Division Y's chain of command.

"You can say that again," scowled Kay. "Just what the hell is Degurechaff ?! De Lugo insisted that she was the one responsible for all of Division Y, but Lergen was the one in charge on the Rhine. Do we know anything about him ?"

"We do, as a matter of fact. Take a look." Agravain put a photograph on the table, showing a man with black hair and a pair of glasses wearing an Imperial uniform and staring straight into the camera in the stern, emotionless way people did for official photographs in all civilized nations. "This is Eric von Lergen, a Colonel attached to the Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army, specifically the Operations section."

"That was fast," remarked Kay.

"That would be because the good Colonel was already a subject of interest related to our investigation into Tanya Degurechaff."

"How so ?" asked Merlin, speaking up for the first time since the start of the discussion.

"Our agents have been able to find out that Degurechaff was raised in an Imperial orphanage until her high magic potential was detected as part of the Empire's nationwide testing for magic aptitude. She then immediately joined the Army, despite being absurdly young, so someone had to have pulled some strings there."

That went without saying. The Empire's mage conscription laws might technically lack a lower age limit, but surely someone would have raised a protest over having a child of barely seven years join the Imperial Army. That it hadn't happened was a tell-tale sign there was something sinister afoot.

"We haven't been able to get the records of her time at the Academy," continued Agravain, "but we did get a note that apparently Eric von Lergen intervened during a disciplinary matter concerning her. More importantly, it was him who suggested she be transferred to Division Y upon graduation."

There was a moment of silence as the group of some of the most powerful men in Albion digested the news.

"So," Kay said at last, "she isn't the leader of the Division after all. Merely one of their early living weapons, whom this Lergen kept watch over ? But then why send her to an orphanage in the first place ?"

"Practicality ?" suggested Mordred. "Regardless of how they created her, she would have started as a baby. I know I wouldn't trust our scientists with caring for a real, flesh-and-blood infant : most of them can barely keep themselves from starving to death. Or maybe they wanted to see if she could mix with normal people without raising suspicion. Do we know anything else to Lergen ?"

"Well, before being assigned to Operations, Lergen worked in Personnel. Meaning he would be in the perfect place to locate people of interests as well as covertly smooth things out for their living weapon as she made her way through the system until she was ready to return to the fold."

"In the end," Agravain cut the discussion short, "this is a matter that will require further investigation. Right now, what matters the most is how we can fight back against the Wunderwaffen in the short-term, or else this is going to be a very short war. Merlin ?"

"I actually may have something," said the Royal Wizard hesitantly. "After what I found out by accident in the records, I expanded the parameters of my search and it turns out that the record of the battle against the Not-Man and his creations from a thousand years ago might not have been the first time such a threat came to pass. If my theory is correct, then thousands of years ago, in the Southern Continent, a similar evil rose. The priests of the time wielded primitive but very real magic, and they led the forces of their god-king into battle against this enemy."

Kay blinked. "Where did you find anything like that ?"

"In the last century, our country had something of a … fascination, let's say, for the Land of the Pyramids." Merlin sighed. "Frankly, it bordered on the obsession, and it definitely didn't help our reputation in the Southern Continent. A lot of priceless relics were destroyed or lost during that time, but my predecessors managed to salvage some of the more interesting pieces and stored copies into the archives of my office. I was very lucky to find what I was looking for only after a week or so of research."

"That was very lucky," said Mordred, surprised. He had caught a glimpse of the Royal Wizard's archives once. Politely phrased, you could said they were exhaustive; less politely, that they were the results of generations of compulsive hoarders gathering everything even remotely linked to magic they could find.

"Indeed. Just like in the Dark Ages text, the priests of the era apparently purged all trace of their enemy after its defeat, but they kept the records of the spells they used against it, with just enough description of the intended targets for me to recognize them. And I have found the scrolls on which these spells were recorded. I haven't tested them yet, but the spell formulas appear to be sound."

"It sounds like something out of the penny dreadful," muttered Kay, shaking his head. "An ancient evil, rising every thousand years or so to unleash its monstrous creations upon the world, only to be defeated by holy warriors each time ? How are we supposed to present this to Parliament and not get laughed out ?"

"Simple : we don't," said Mordred curtly. "Everything about this should be treated as a state secret, and Agravain's people will continue their efforts to learn more about Division Y, and we will see whether Lergen or Degurechaff are related to this … this 'Not-Man'. Now, Merlin, those spells you found. What do they do ?"

"If I've translated the first one correctly, then it is meant to bar the passage of the evil one's creations. There are more, but I haven't been able to work on them yet."

"… If this works, then it would be a huge advantage," admitted Kay.

"Even if it works, there will be limitations," warned Merlin. "I doubt I can do much more than ward Londinium itself, and just that will require a lot of effort and resources."

"Do we really think the Imperials would attack Londinium ?" asked Mordred. "They have been very careful to follow the laws of war thus far."

"I don't think they would bomb us, no," said Kay pensively. "But they don't need to : their stealth mages could just fly in at night and perform targeted assassinations : I don't think there is anything in the laws of war about, say, leaving Churbull's head atop the statue of Trafalgar Square. If these spells can prevent that, they are worth trying out. Alright. What do you need to get it done, Merlin ?"

The Royal Wizard began to list the requirements of the warding spell, some of which were frankly bizarre, but none of which should be impossible to find. For the first time since the news of the Rhine disaster had reached them, the members of the Round Table began to feel a cautious sense of optimism. They were still far from unravelling the mystery of Division Y, but even the prospect of a way to fight back against its Wunderwaffen was enough to lift their spirits.

---

*June 6th, 1925 – Francois Republic, somewhere on the Southern coast*

As the smuggling boat approached them, Pierre-Michel De Lugo reflected that their group must make for a strange sight indeed. Two Holy Knights, back in their mortal guise, their eyes glowing golden within their stone-like faces and their skin pale and smooth as marble; the Archbishop of Parisee, deprived of his robes of office; and him, out of uniform for the first time in years.

They had made their way across the country all the way down from Parisee, though De Lugo didn't remember much of the trip. Since hearing the news of the Holy Knights' defeat and the failure of his final gamble to save the Republic, the former Vice-Minister had been in a state of shock, barely aware of his surroundings, his mind endlessly replaying the last few months, wondering what he should have done to avoid this disaster. If not for the Archbishop coming to extract him from the capital, De Lugo would probably be in the hands of the Imperial Army by now – if not hung or shot by a furious mob for his failures that had led to the deaths of so many of their sons, brothers and husbands.

De Lugo didn't resent the President for denouncing him. After all, he had failed. Failed the Army, failed his country, failed God Himself. He had fully resigned himself to his doom, and even at least partially looked forward to an end to it all. Instead, here he was. All he knew was what the Archbishop had told him : that the Lord still had a use for him in the holy struggle against the Empire. Still, that he'd been given an unexpected second chance didn't diminish the magnitude of his failings in the slightest.

The boat dropped anchor, and a man descended into the shallow waters before walking up to them. Apart from the rosary hanging around his neck, there was nothing to mark the man's allegiance.

"Archbishop, General," he greeted them with a thick Ildoan accent. "I am Dominico. Please follow me."

"Wait," De Lugo found himself saying. "Where exactly are you taking us ?"

Dominico smiled. "To the Holy See, of course. His Holiness has been eager to meet all of you."

"His … His Holiness ?" asked De Lugo, shocked. It had been years since the leader of the Holy See had gotten involved into the base politics of the wider world. As a whole, the Church had become more and more detached from the affairs of state as the countries of Europa became unwilling to allow such interference from an outside power.

Was this when they had started losing their way, ultimately allowing the Empire to fall to heresy ?

"Yes," Dominico nodded, before turning to the Archbishop. "Months ago, His Holiness received a vision from the Lord, much like you did, your Excellency. And then again a few days ago, commanding him to reach out to you so that the blessed warriors of Francois could be rescued from the heretics' grasp and continue fighting the good fight. You are not the first ones to have been rescued like this : one of our most important recruits come from the Empire itself, having had his eyes opened by the Lord to his nation's evil."

"I … I am honored beyond words to have been judged worthy," De Lugo managed to say. "I will do all I can to assist His Holiness in riding the world of the Empire's evil."

"Then let me welcome you, General, Archbishop, and blessed scions of Francois," said Dominico with a benevolent smile, "to the Congregation of Michael."

From : Military Doctor Viktor Weber

To : Director Tanya Degurechaff

Subject : Legadonian captives

Date : June 10th, 1925

*Director,*

*There has been an outbreak of sickness in the detention facility for Legadonian mages. From what we can tell, the contagion is perfectly ordinary. Nevertheless, following your request that we err on the side of caution where these prisoners are concerned, we request that an expert be sent from Castle Schwartzstein to ensure there is nothing wrong with our guests on the occult side of things as well as on the medicinal one.*

---

From : Director Tanya Degurechaff

To : Military Doctor Viktor Weber

Subject : Request granted

Date : June 11th, 1925

*Request granted. Additional medical personnel and magical testing apparatus will arrive on-site within two weeks. Be aware that, for personal health reasons, I will be accompanying the medical team.*

---

*June 18th, 1925 – The Unified States*

In the capital of a nation that, to the venerable and arrogant Europan powers, was still very much in its infancy, a man sat in the office of his predecessors. By the reckoning of most, he was the most powerful man on the continent, but such power did not come without heavy responsibilities and duties, and could never be wielded freely – not that the man thought it should be, for such would go against all the values of his country that he'd sworn to uphold upon taking his current position two years prior after the death of the man who'd sat in this chair before him.

The majority of the States' citizens had no interest in joining a Europan war, and the President could hardly blame them. If this were a normal war, he would leave the folks of the Old Continent kill each other until they were exhausted. The stories coming out of Arene also weren't exactly putting the Empire's opposition in the best of lights.

The problem was, it wasn't a normal war, and hadn't been since the Imperials had wiped out the Dacian Army with their first revealed Wunderwaffe.

The President had seen the records of the so-called 'Devils of the Rhine' in action. At first, he hadn't believed them to be real, though whether they were mere propaganda or the Imperials

deciding to use illusion magic for terror effects had been unclear. He knew better now, having received independent confirmation from the few brave American war reporters who'd been willing to risk the trenches for a shot at glory. At least their pictures weren't being taken seriously by most of the population, for the same reasons the President and his staff hadn't. Only the most religious fringes believed the images to be real, and they had taken to preaching vehemently for the US to join the war against what they saw as a clear alliance between the Empire and the darkness of Hell itself.

Of course, the President himself didn't believe the Empire had made some kind of pact with the Devil. He was a man of God, but still considered himself rational. Much more likely the Devils of the Rhine and the rest of the Imperial Wunderwaffen were the fruits of decades of secret magical research, driven by the Empire being surrounded on all sides by enemy powers and seeking a way to ensure its security.

The problem was, the Imperial researchers, whoever they were, had done their job too well.

Yes, there was an entire ocean between the States and the Empire, but with every advance in orbal and aviation technology, the significance of that distance diminished a little more. The latest simulations the General Staff had brought him showed that, with only slightly optimistic assumptions about the capabilities of current Imperial technology, one of their stealth mages could cross the ocean in a few days and there would be absolutely nothing they could do to stop or even notice them. And while a single mage didn't sound like much, the thought of an undetectable flying killer operating freely within their borders was enough to give nightmares to the people charged with the country's security.

And that was just one of the Empire's arsenal of superweapons, which it had kept so secret no one had even suspected it existed until the Dacian Army had been destroyed in less than a day. To this day, there was fierce debate within the intelligence community as to why the Empire had only deployed its Wunderwaffen against Dacia and not straight to the Rhine Front. Theories ranged from Imperial high command itself not being fully aware of what the Wunderwaffen were capable of, to Division Y, the Wunderwaffen's mysterious makers, having acted of their own initiative because their headquarters were located somewhere the Dacian Army threatened to stumble upon.

At present, there was no reason for the Unified States to join the war against the Empire, nor was there a reason for the Empire to attack the States. And, God willing, things would remain as such for the rest of the President's term, and that of his successor. But what about his successor's successor ? Or his successor ? Peace between nations could never be guaranteed to last forever, safe in empty rhetoric.

It was his job to ensure the safety of his country in the long run, not just in the few short years he would be at its helm. Which meant he had to obtain some manner of counter to the Imperial Wunderwaffen, to guarantee that the Empire couldn't just roll over the States if the whim took it. The States had fought long and hard for their independence from Europan powers, and he wouldn't be damned by History for failing to recognize the threat in time.

Hence the various discreet efforts he'd authorized to support the Allied Kingdom in its now singular struggle against the Empire … as well as tonight's meeting.

The door to his office opened after a polite knock, and a guard introduced two men inside. One of them was an aide to the President, who had worked for him loyally through years of public office; the other looked to be in his mid-forties, with black hair and a short mustache, and a wild look in his eyes. He carried a briefcase, holding it close as if it were full of gold.

"This is Nicol Teslus, Mister President," the aide introduced him.

"Glad to meet you, Mister Teslus," said the President after exchanging a surprisingly firm handshake with the man. "I have heard a lot of things about you. They tell me you are one of this country's pre-eminent magical engineers."

"Indeed, Mister President. Though I'm only a middling mage myself, I've already designed a computation orb twice as efficient as those museum pieces your soldiers are using," Teslus boasted.

The President glanced at his aide, who nodded in confirmation. Well. That alone certainly made this meeting worthwhile, though the thought of how far behind the Empire their orbal tech must be was as painful as ever. Still, he couldn't help but give voice to his suspicions :

"If you're that good, then why weren't you working for us already ?"

"I believe there are three reasons for that, Mister President." Some of the man's boastfulness dissipated as he went on. "The first is that, for all my genius, I am a poor businessman, something I have been forced to recognize several times. Regardless of the greatness of my designs, it means little if I cannot convince others of their potential. The second is that I'm an immigrant, and one originating from the Empire to boot : your government being unwilling to trust me with development of magical weaponry is understandable if a regrettable sign of small-mindedness. The third is that … well, frankly speaking, until the Reich demonstrated the feasibility of superweapons by deploying their Wunderwaffen, the very notion seemed ridiculous to most people."

"That makes sense. But why would you be willing to work against your birth nation ?"

"The Unified States aren't at war with the Empire yet, Mister President. However," Teslus sighed, "I am not blind. As long as the Empire remains unrivalled thanks to its monopoly on magical superweapons, it has little incentive to stop fighting. Even if the Imperial soldiers themselves want to, they might be pressured to continue their conquests by public opinion, drunk on the wine of victory without being able to truly grasp its enormous cost."

"So you see," Teslus continued, "me helping the Unified States in building something capable of standing up to the Empire's Wunderwaffen isn't just good for this land which welcomed and adopted me, but also for the Empire itself – nay, for the world."

The President blinked. For a second there, he'd thought he saw a glimmer of gold in the other man's eyes, but it was gone. It must have been a trick of the light, or he was more stressed and tired than he'd thought.

"… I see. Very well. Show me what you've got then, Mister Teslus."

"With pleasure, Mister President," replied the scientist with a smile, opening his briefcase to reveal sheaves of neatly arranged paper. "To show you the potential of what I'm proposing, I believe we should start with this particular design of mine …"

Chapter End Notes

AN : THERE ! An entire chapter, over 9k words, written in just four days. Is it enough, oh Muse ?! Are you satisfied ?!

Lots of fallout and lots of setting things up in this chapter. Not a lot of Mythos, but that's the way the story rolls. I spent entirely too long working out how the Kingdom would join the war after launching an attack before making a formal declaration. It turns out that in canon, Drake's attack was just never acknowledged as far as I can tell, and in the LN it wasn't even part of the plan - they were just there as observers, and then Operation Shock & Awe happened and they decided to try to help while concealing their nationality. In this story, however, things went ... differently.

The name of Nicol Teslus is credited to Pinklestia101, who suggested "Nicol Теслus", and there was no way that name would have made it through the immigration process of the times unbutchered From my (admittedly very cursory) research, the real Nikola Tesla was born in the village of Smiljan, in the Austrian Empire. Looking at Google Maps, that village would definitely be within the borders of the Empire. Hence Teslus being an Imperial immigrant in this story. And yes, his work is going to be closely monitored. Also, he's a magical engineer because, let's be honest, of course he would be in that universe. I didn't strictly need to make him a mage (Schugel isn't one as far as I can tell, and that didn't stop him from designing the Type-95 and Type-97), but I felt it would be more interesting. Finally, I changed his birthdate so that he's a bit younger here. If De Lugo (who is clearly based on De Gaulle) can be the chief of the Francois Armed Forces in 1924, then Teslus can be a couple of decades younger too.

Rudersdorf may sound out of character in his scene, but canonically, the Empire didn't have plans for invading foreign countries. And I don't mean just politically either : I mean, they literally didn't have a plan drafted for foreign campaigns, which is why the logistics of invading the Entente were so messed up. In the LN, in order to fight off the Russy Federation, they had to crib the notes of the Francois Army, which were written in case of an invasion of the Empire. So the focus on internal defense lines is entirely canonical. As for the Brigadier General's lack of interest in outright conquest, well, he did spend some time with Tanya during the Entente campaign. And while Tanya is still "just" a Major, her position as Director of Division Y does give her far more clout than she ever had in canon. Junior officer or not, when the girl who turned a gathering of crackpots into a fountain of miracles discusses the end of hostilities with you, you listen respectfully to her opinions.

Oh, and just to clarify, the Holy See is the Not!Vatican. If you have any suggestions for alternative names I could use, go ahead. And as always, please tell me what you thought

of this chapter and what you are hoping to see in the future of this story, along with the usual Projekt suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Brothers,*

*The time has come. For months, we have suffered the indignity of our fatherland being occupied by the vile invaders from the Empire. All that time, we've stayed in the shadows, gathering our strength and making preparations. Now, at long last, the long-awaited hour is upon us.*

*The Imperial dogs must learn that our glorious fatherland will never submit to them. They must be taught to fear the wrath of the country they have trampled under their boots. The traitors who turned their back on the fatherland must be brought down, so that our country, purified of their cowardice, can rise again.*

*We have all made our own plans to strike at the filth polluting our homeland. Tomorrow, we will enact them all, rising up as an unstoppable legion. Those of us who die shall do so secure in the knowledge that their sacrifice paves the pay for a better tomorrow, where our fatherland can regain the glory that was stolen from us by invaders and traitors.*

*Legadonia shall never fall !"*

Excerpt from a missive circulated among the partisan cells within Legadonia, June 13th, 1925.

---

*June 14th, 1925 – Legadonian Entente – Imperial Detention Facility*

Colonel Anson Sue – his Imperial captors made a point of always addressing him by his rank, even if he found it unlikely he'd ever command a unit in the field again – stretched his limbs as he stepped off the examination table.

"So, Doctor," he asked. "What's the verdict ?"

Doctor Iosefka was a blond, professional-looking woman, and the leader of the small group of experts who had come from the Empire to check on the prisoners after the sickness that had run through their ranks over the last few weeks. It felt weird for Anson to see a woman be an actual doctor instead of a nurse, but then the Empire was a meritocracy, and that was nothing compared to the literal child who had accompanied her.

"You'll be fine," she told him. "The initial diagnosis was correct : it was just a normal flu, if a bit off-season. It might have been dangerous for someone more fragile, but you and your men are soldiers in prime condition. There shouldn't be any lingering effects." She turned to look at the other person in the room. "Really, Director, you overreacted. I can understand being careful, but any of our medical experts could have confirmed this."

"I didn't want to take any risks," replied the tiny Major sitting to the side. "Did you locate the vector of infection ?"

The doctor nodded. "Oh, yes. One of the local cooks fell sick recently, with the same symptoms. I expect he brought the infection in while asymptomatic, and given how closely together the Colonel and his men live, the virus spread quickly among them."

"I see. Could I trouble you for some hygiene recommendations to spread across town before we go back home ? An epidemy is among the last things the troops here need."

"I will have a list ready before tonight," nodded the doctor. "Now, shoo. Bring the good colonel back to his men with the good news."

"I see your doctors are a lot more free-spirited than ours," Anson observed once they were out of the room.

"I assure you, Iosefka is in a category all her own in more ways than one," answered Major Degurechaff with a thin smile. "Her expertise is undeniable, though, so I am willing to give her a lot of leeway."

When he'd asked her what had happened to her eyes that required her to wear sunglasses even indoor - despite clearly not being blinded - she had frozen in place, her cheeks reddening, before whispering something about an unexpected side-effect of her battle magic. Anson hadn't pushed her : it wasn't his place to ask if she wasn't comfortable talking about it.

His men were in the courtyard, doing their daily exercise. Anson had insisted they keep in shape, as much for their health as to avoid giving everyone too much time to brood. All humans found routine reassuring, and soldiers especially so. The last six months certainly had been more relaxing than the ones before : his only complaint about their treatment was the food, but he had seen the guards eat the same stuff, and they didn't get care packages from their families. They'd even been given newspapers, which really showed how confident the Empire was that they weren't going to do anything stupid.

To the side of the courtyard, a janitor was pushing a cart full of cleaning equipment. They passed by him, Anson about to ask the Major a question about allowing his daughter to come visit, when suddenly –

"DEATH TO TRAITORS !" the janitor screamed as he lunged at Anson, a knife in his hands.

Anson's first reflex was to shove Major Degurechaff aside – which was stupid, as she was armed with a computation orb and he was not. Then the man slammed into him, and something cold and sharp pierced through his chest, between his ribs and into his lungs.

Anson felt a surge of mana, and his attacker was sent flying, crashing on the ground before being immediately dog-piled by his men. It seemed their reflexes were in a better shape than his own, he thought deliriously as blood flowed from his wound.

Anson had seen enough death on the battlefield to know what was happening to him : he was drowning in his own blood as it filled his lungs.

*Oh, God,* he thought amidst the pain. *Is this the price of surviving the war when so many did not ?*

"No, don't you dare ! You don't get to die on me like that, Colonel Sue !"

Ah, to think she could be so emotional. A shame it was in those circumstances.

"Sorry," he managed to whisper through the pain. "Tell my … family … I love -"

"I said," she cut him off, snarling, **"you don't get to die."**

Her glasses had slipped off. He could see her eyes now. Her eyes … were … full of stars …

As darkness crept around him, she rammed her oh-so-little fist into his chest. Light erupted from the computation orb held tightly in her hand, washing over Anson.

Then there was more pain, and merciful blackness.

---

*"Mrs Sue,*

*It is with great shame and regret that I must inform you that your husband, Colonel Anson Sue, was victim of an assassination attempt by a Legadonian partisan while walking within the courtyard of the detention complex he and his men were stationed in.*

*YOUR HUSBAND'S LIFE ISN'T IN DANGER. I feel I must make this clear, knowing the distress my earlier words have no doubt caused you. Although his injuries were severe, we used top-of-the-line magical healing and his condition is currently stable.*

*However, this grotesque and unforgivable act has revealed a present and real threat to the captives of the Imperial Army on Legadonian soil. It has therefore been decided to move Colonel Sue and the mages who surrendered with him to a more secure location within the Empire's mainland, in order to prevent further attempts against their lives.*

*Which brings me to the second point of this letter. During interrogation, the criminal who attempted to kill Colonel Sue made some worrying claims, which I won't elaborate upon in this letter. Suffice to say, I believe that you and your daughter are in danger due to your relation to the Colonel. Therefore, I would like to offer you the opportunity to follow your husband to the Empire. While I cannot compel you to accept, I must insist that the danger you and your daughter are in is very real, and I would be remiss in my obligations to Colonel Sue if I didn't take it seriously. To make things more palatable, I can promise that visits to your husband will be easier to arrange if you accept, for both you and your daughter : our medical personel believes this could only assist in his recovery.*

*Lieutenant Grantz, who delivered this letter to you, has also been tasked with ensuring your security during this relocation. He is a veteran of the Rhine Front, and I trust in his skills and abilities to keep you safe should my suspicions come to pass.*

*If you choose to refuse my offer, which is perfectly within your rights, I would still advise you to be extremely cautious, and to move to a friend's or relative's house for the immediate*

*future. Lieutenant Grantz can give you more detailed advice on this as well.*

*I offer you my most sincere apologies for what befell your husband while in our care.*

*Respectfully,*

*Major Degurechaff."*

Letter from Major Degurechaff to the house of Colonel Anson Sue, written June 15th, 1925.

---

*June 16th, 1925 – Legadonian Entente – House of the Sue family*

Mary tore her eyes from the letter she had read over her mother's shoulder to look at the Imperial soldier sitting on the opposite side of the table in their living room. Despite what the letter said, Warren Grantz, as he'd introduced himself, didn't look like much : he couldn't be more than a year or two older than her, and one of his arms was held in a sling.

"Please, Lieutenant. Do – do you have any more details about my husband's situation ?" asked her mother, her voice trembling.

"He will make a full recovery," affirmed the Lieutenant, before grimacing. "But … it's going to take time. Months, at best. The healing method that was used to save his life took a lot out of him. And by the time he gets out of bed, he is going to need a lot of rehabilitation."

"Why ?" Mary asked plaintively. "Why did they do it ?"

"The investigation is still ongoing, Miss. The Major herself avoided the subject in her letter, didn't she ? It would be remiss of me to speculate …"

"Please," she insisted. "I … I need to know."

Lieutenant Grantz glanced between her and her mother, then sighed.

"Very well. If we take the assassin's words as face value, the attack was motivated by your father's surender to the Empire at the Osfjord. They blame him for the defeat of the Entente. Which," he stressed, "is complete and utter nonsense. By the time your father surrendered, the Osfjord had already fallen. I may just be a Lieutenant, but even I know that by that point the defeat of the Entente was unavoidable, if not long before. And I have personally met and trained with the soldiers who were involved in the operation, so I can tell you with confidence that any further fighting on his part would only have resulted in his death and that of his men. Instead, by surrendering, he helped bring the conflict to an early end and avoided hundreds, potentially thousands more needless deaths, most of which would have been on the Entente's side."

"If it's that obvious, then why do they blame him ?" asked Mary.

"That … is difficult for me to say. I am an Imperial, Miss Sue. We pride ourselves on our pragmatism and rational approach. If I were to guess, though, I would say it's because blaming Colonel Sue is easier than acknowledging that the Entente made a mistake declaring

war in the first place. Which, by the way, is an opinion shared by most Legadonian soldiers who actually fought in the war. As far as we've been able to tell, the assassin never fought on the frontlines himself."

"I … I see." She didn't, not really. But it sounded plausible enough. She'd seen a lot of anger simmering under the surface as she walked around town, and several looks aimed at her that, looking back on them now, suddenly seemed a lot more sinister.

"What are your thoughts on the Major's offer ?" asked Grantz.

Mary looked at her mother expectantly. She didn't want to leave her friends here, but the thought of her father being taken even further away for such a long time without her mother being able to see him was far worse. Even exchanging letters would become difficult, if her father was even in a state to write, which sounded doubtful.

"My place is at my husband's side," said her mother resolutely. "And I won't let Mary be taken from my side either. We will be troubling you and your commanding officer, Lieutenant Grantz."

"Very well." He smiled in relief. "She'll be happy to hear it. To be frank, I think she took the attempt on Colonel Sue's life rather badly."

"She ?" asked Mary, cocking her head. "Your commanding officer is a woman ?"

"Hmm ? Oh, right, the Entente Army didn't allow women in its ranks even for mages, did it ? Yes, she is. Well, 'woman' may be an exaggeration, but … you'll see for yourself when we meet her."

Mary blinked, and wondered what Grantz meant. It didn't really matter, though. She was going to see her father again !

---

*"State your name for the record."*

*"... Greger Klass."*

*"And who exactly are you, Greger Klass ?"*

*"I am one of the sparks that will set Legadonia's fighting spirit ablaze ! I am a soldier fighting for the freedom of my fatherland ! I am -"*

*"You are none of these things. What you are is a drunkard who was dishonorably discharged from the Legadonian Army three years before the war started for unsightly conduct in the line of duty, along with insulting your superior, laziness, and a bunch of other charges. Since then, you've lived off menial jobs and petty crime. There is no army in the world who would be willing to have you as one of its soldiers."*

*"Shut up ! It's all you Imperials fault ! You started this ! You invaded our country !"*

*"Everybody knows it was the Entente's government that started this by sending troops into Norden."*

*"Ah ! That's what you want us to think ! But we aren't idiots ! We know it was you who pushed them into doing that so you'd have a reason to invade us ! Why else would you respond to by launching a full-scale invasion ? You were already prepared for it ! It was always your plan to destroy Legadonia ! But you won't succeed, we won't let you !"*

*"... I am speechless. Is that how you justify your crimes to yourself ?"*

*"I am not a criminal ! That bastard had it coming ! He betrayed the fatherland !"*

*"You are deluded if you really believe this. While you were getting drunk in the rear and wasting your life in seedy bars, Colonel Sue was fighting in Norden. We have the records of the war's early engagements : his actions during those days are a big part of the reason the Entente was able to keep fighting as long as it did in the first place."*

*"If he were a true patriot, then he would have died fighting before surrendering ! Instead, he was talking to that Imperial witch as if they were old friends !"*

*"What you are describing is a fanatic, not a patriot. A patriot does what is best for his country, and in Colonel Sue's case, that was not throwing away his life and those of his men in a battle that couldn't be won and shouldn't have been fought in the first place."*

*"No ! He gave up our nation's pride, its honor ! Without that, we are nothing ! We have to reclaim it, no matter the cost !"*

*"Idiot. The moment this war ends, the Empire will withdraw its troops from the Entente. All you and your accomplices have done is make things harder for your own compatriots, the very people you claim to fight for."*

*"If they are true patriots, then they will join us. The rest are all traitors who can rot in hell !"*

*"Really ? Even the civilians who were caught in the blast of your explosives ? Even the children who had to be sent to the hospital with burned and broken bodies ? They are the one who will go to hell ?"*

*"..."*

*"Oh, and one last thing : Colonel Sue survived. He will fully recover from your pathetic attack and be eventually reunited with his family, while you rot in prison for the rest of your days, having thrown away your life and accomplished nothing in return."*

*"You ... you ..."*

*"That will be all for now. I can't bear to listen to this nonsense any longer. Take him away, men : we'll resume our discussion once he's had some time to think on his own, if he is capable of that much."*

Excerpt from the interrogation record of Greger Klass, citizen of the Legadonian Entente and member of the Citizens's Committee for the Liberation of Legadonia, one of several organizations involved in the partisan attacks across Legadonia, June 15th, 1925.

---

*VICIOUS ATTACKS SEND FEAR ACROSS LEGADONIA !*

*Yesterday, the Special Administrated Territory of Legadonia was struck by a series of criminal attacks orchestrated by rogue elements who refused to accept the end of their nation's participation in the war it unjustly provoked.*

*The vile criminals were indiscriminating in their choice of targets : they bombed a civilian administrator's car in the middle of a crowded street, ambushed off-duty military personel, and even attempted to kill Legadonian soldiers who surrendered to the Empire at the end of the conflict between the Reich and the Entente. Dozens of people, the vast majority of them ordinary citizens caught in the crossfire, have been wounded, and while the death toll is still being tallied as doctors across the nation struggle to save as many lives as possible, at least a dozen fatalities have already been confirmed.*

*However, in a speech to the assembled press, Brigadier General Rudersdorf called for calm. The general, who led the campaign against the Entente and oversaw the signature of its surrender, reminded us that in most cases, the criminals responsible for these despicable acts were either killed or captured. He reaffirmed that these were the actions of only a small group of cowardly malcontents, and that the Empire would soon drag their accomplices out of the shadows where they cower to face judgment (a more complete rendition of the speech can be found on page 2).*

*The civilian administration of Legadonia also denounced these attacks ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, June 15th, 1925.

---

*HEROIC LEGADONIAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS FIGHT BACK AGAINST IMPERIAL OPPRESSION !*

*The people of occupied Legadonia have sent a strong message to the Empire that though their armed forces may have been defeated, their nation's spirit remains undaunted. Ordinary citizens have taken up arms in defense of their homeland, and struck at military targets all over Legadonia, challenging the Empire's stranglehold on the country.*

*In response, the Empire has redoubled its harsh oppression of occupied Legadonia. Citizens have been dragged out of their homes and into Imperial interrogation cells whose walls still ring from the screams of the partisans who were captured alive. Among the population, chilling tales circulate of the horrors such captives are subjected to, as the Empire bends its mastery of medical science to the dark purpose of breaking those who resist its will.*

*Councilor-in-exile Abensoll praised his compatriots' courage and devotion to their fatherland, and called for all civilized nations of the world to support their struggle for freedom ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Londinium Times, June 15th, 1925.

---

*June 17th, 1925 – Occupied city of Os*

I sighed in contentment as I sat back on the bench and basked in the warm sunlight, ignoring the hubbub of activity on the dock around me as the last bits of cargo were loaded aboard the ship that would take me, Doctor Iosefka's crew, and our mage prisoners back to the Imperial mainland. For once, there was nothing I had to do, and this location was guarded by both Division Y troopers and regular Imperial soldiers in the wake of the recent string of partisan attacks, so I could simply relax and think.

A cup of Visha's coffee would have complemented things nicely, but bringing her along wouldn't have made sense. Due to the side effects of Endlose Nacht, she would have effectively been knocked out for the maritime leg of the trip, meaning I had to bring additional bodyguards – and if I was already doing that, then bringing her along was surplus to requirements, especially when there was so much work going on at Division Y's headquarters. Also, she had just been reunited with her friend after months of separation and censured letters, so bringing her along might have fostered resentment I definitely didn't want. Although I could definitely have used her, given the mess that had happened at the prison camp.

After stabilizing Anson Sue's condition, Doctor Iosefka had left to assist in dealing with the sudden flux of wounded from the partisan groups' terror attacks. Technically speaking, she had asked my permission before doing so, but I'd known from looking at her that refusing her on safety grounds would be a mistake. She would have gone anyway : she took her medical oath very seriously.

As the premier medical expert of Division Y, her willpower was as strong as one would expect : she hadn't even blinked when I had been ushered into her office on a wheelchair, my body still reeling from the Kosmosblut I'd taken at Arene. Fortunately, Iosefka was one of the Empire's greatest magical healers, held back from being acknowledged as such only by her gender and Russy ancestry. For all that the Empire prided itself on being strictly meritocratic, it still hadn't completely outgrown such prejudices, though I knew it was still leagues ahead of the rest of the world. But if the medical community was unwilling to recognize Iosefka's talents, I certainly wasn't, and after learning about her from the good Professor Gehrman, I had extended her an offer to join Division Y which she had accepted.

I certainly had no reason to regret that decision, as Doctor Iosefka's exemplary treatment of the backlash of my use of Kosmosblut in Arene had only been the latest of the services she had provided to Division Y. A combination of standard methods and magical healing had brought me back almost to my state before the battle of Arene, and she was certain I'd completely recover with only a few more weeks of moderate activity.

Hopefully the effort of using the spell that had saved Colonel Sue's life hadn't pushed that date back too much. I wasn't a true healing mage like Iosefka : the spell I had used was an all-purpose recovery one, pre-loaded in my computation orb. More importantly, it used a Mythos formula 'reconstructed' by the Denkmaschine. In this case, that meant it was dangerously hard to cast and horrifyingly painful and draining for the target. But it had worked, even if Iosefka

could probably have done much better. In the heat of the moment, I hadn't been willing to risk the Colonel dying in the few moments it would have taken for her to arrive.

Such a priceless human resource deserved to be allowed to do what she felt like from time to time so long as it didn't impede on her duties. And besides, it was good PR. The line between terrorist and freedom fighter had always been a thin one, especially in my old world. Based on what we'd learned from the Colonel's attempted killer, these particular partisans weren't exactly the cream of Legadonia's society, which made me wonder. Idiots like Mister Klass could run their mouths all they wanted, but someone had coordinated the attacks across the entire Legadonian territory. Someone with some degree of management skill had orchestrated it, sending the disposable pawns like Klass off to their doom in order to make a statement (and probably remove the more annoying recruits from their groups while they were at it).

Some degree of partisan activity had been inevitable, of course : nationalism was one hell of a drug, and forcing an entire nation to go cold turkey was bound to cause some reaction. But from what I'd heard, Imperial Intelligence had expected a much more low-key style of resistance to the occupation - sabotage, theft, the occasional beating of an Imperial soldier dumb enough to get drunk while off-duty. Not what amounted to terrorism with no regard for civilian casualties.

It didn't take a genius to guess who was behind that. The Allied Kingdom had supported the Entente's war effort behind the scenes for months before its fall, all to help take some pressure off the Republic, and they had the government-in-exile set up in Londinium as well. From their point of view, chaos in the occupied territories could only benefit them : at best, they would secure a fifth column to help in their eventual 'liberation' of Legadonia, at worst, the Empire would be forced to divest resources to keep control of the region while tarnishing its international image.

As for the civilians who had died in the process, well, such was the price of liberation. I was sure the gentlemen in Londinium would shed a manly tear for their brave sacrifices and swear not to let them be in vain with a hand pressed against their heart. Nevermind the fact that, from what I'd seen, the overwhelming majority of Legadonians were like Colonel Sue : sane people who wanted to live in peace with their families and loved ones, and would much rather put the stupidity of their previous government behind them. The raison d'etat wouldn't let them consider such things.

It wasn't logical, but then if the Allied Kingdom was driven purely by logic they would have realized declaring war on the Empire was not going to work out in any way they liked. As Director of Division Y, I was privy to information far above my nominal rank of Major. And based on what I knew, the best way I could think of to describe the current state of hostilities with the Allied Kingdom was 'Phony War'. The Albish didn't have nearly enough troops to invade us, and we didn't have enough ships to punch through their Navy and invade them. So both sides were stuck glaring at each other over the sea, shouting insults and making the occasional probe. Not very pleasant for anyone involved, yes, but still far better than the mud and blood of the Rhine Front for sure.

It would be great if the diplomats could solve this mess with words instead of bullets, but I wasn't holding my breath. If the Allied Kingdom was anything like the British Empire of my

old world, they would be far too arrogant to admit to having made a mistake.

As for a military resolution, while I didn't want to besmirch the Imperial Navy's honor, they hadn't exactly covered themselves in glory when the Entente fleet had eluded them, however near-impossible the task of containing it had been. It was far more likely that the Empire would end up asking me for another miracle to break the deadlock. In anticipation of that, I had put some people on the problem back at Castle Schwartzstein, to see how some of our Projekte could be used to solve that particular problem. I didn't want to unleash more Mythos-born horrors upon the world, but if I had to do it, then I would do it right, and NOT improvise something at the last minute. That way laid accidentally bringing forth the apocalypse.

So far, I had to admit that my fears about using the Projekte in open warfare hadn't come to pass, and I wasn't so arrogant as to fail to realize when I'd made an error in judgment. I'd feared that the sight of the Werwölfe would drive the entire civilized world to declare war against us, but so far that hadn't been the case. A few religious wackos had protested in front of our embassy in the Unified States, but if anything that had only solidified the rest of the public opinion, which hadn't been willing to risk being associated with them. After so many months working in Division Y and worrying about worst-case scenarios, I'd forgotten how utterly absurd the foundations of our research really were.

Of course people thought the Werwölfe were illusions. That possibility was much more sensible. And even those who knew they were real didn't realize what their existence actually implied. If there was an equivalent to HP Lovecraft in this world, he either hadn't written anything or … wait, come to think of it, Lovecraft's work had only really took off in my old world long after his death, hadn't it ? I didn't know what effect my interference would have on his writings if he did have an equivalent here, but hopefully it would involve him seeking professional help for his many, many issues.

The fact that the sickness had just been an ordinary flu and had already passed was good news too. In my worst fears, I had imagined an eldritch-touched version of the Spanish Flu that had laid waste to Europe in my old world sweeping through the continent. But again, it seemed I had worried for nothing. Oh well; better to worry ten times for no good reason than to let one catastrophe slip by because of negligence.

I was driven out of my idle musings by a respectful call from one of the soldiers guarding the dock.

"Yes ? What is it ?"

"Major, Lieutenant Grantz has arrived with our guests," the soldier told me.

"Good."

I had sent Grantz to recover Sue's family for the same reason I'd used my magic to save the man's life from that witless would-be assassin : reputation. Per the laws of war, the Empire was responsible for the humane treatment of its prisoners, which included keeping them reasonably safe from harm. And Anson Sue was a prisoner I had personally taken.

Grantz emerged out of the car, the arm he'd lost still held in its sling. We'd managed to reattach him after it'd been cut off by an Eikon the moron had managed to survive briefly fighting, through a combination of magical healing and his own regeneration, but it would still take some time before the nerves grew back fully. And on his other arm …

I closed my eyes, removed and swiped my sunglasses, then put them back on and opened my eyes again. Nope. Nothing had changed. I sighed, and approached the Werwolf I had brought with me to Legadonia as a replacement bodyguard for Visha.

"Lieutenant Grantz," I said in my best officer voice, and he immediately jumped at attention. "Care to tell me why there is a girl who I assume to be Colonel Sue's daughter hanging off your arm ?"

I mean, the two of them were at that age, yes, and the girl was quite cute too, I saw as she stared at me with her head cocked to the side in incomprehension. But still, I expected more decorum from him ! What would the higher-ups think if they saw one of the dreaded Werwölfe responsible for breaking the back of the Republican Army look like that ?

Although, maybe we could use that for propaganda. Keep the Empire from being afraid of its own supersoldiers by showing them some slice-of-life skits … wait, no. I had to focus.

"Ma'am !" he answered, blushing slightly. "This is, uh, well …"

"If you'll allow me, ma'am ?" said Private Keller in a long-suffering tone as he approached, carrying several bags in addition to his kit, an older, nervous-looking woman with a clear ressemblance to the girl hanging off Grantz walking behind him.

Keller was one of the Division Y troopers who had escorted us to Legadonia. I had sent him along with Grantz mostly to serve as a driver, but he was as capable as any of the infantry stationed at Castle Schwartzstein. Well, those who survived with body and mind more or less intact long enough to get used to the weirdness, at any rate. Despite my best efforts, we still had a turnover rate that would've made any self-respecting company back in my old world blush – though not the black ones, at least.

"Very well," I nodded. "Report, Private."

"It was as you feared, ma'am. We were attacked on our way here, and they were after the Sues, not us. They threw a log on the road in front of our car and demanded that we send the – the civilians out."

Those definitely weren't the exact words they had used, but I understood why he didn't want to repeat them in the presence of the Colonel's family. They already looked upset at his present recounting.

"And ?" I prompted him.

"The Lieutenant came out and made a show of dropping his gun, saying he wanted to talk, and that if they wanted to punish someone it made much more sense to do it to him rather

than the civilians. They let him get close, I think because they intended to beat him to death. That … was their last mistake."

I glanced at Grantz, and he slightly shook his head, getting my question immediately. So he hadn't transformed in front of the civvies. Good. Yes, we were planning to have them moved near Castle Schwartzstein, in the same village where we were going to put the prisoners until we could get proper accomodations. But having them freak out in the middle of Legadonia would have made things needlessly complicated.

Besides, a bunch of brigands against a Werwolf in human form ? That shouldn't even be a challenge. Well, Grantz did have to fight with one arm metaphorically tied behind his back, but even then, he had passed the training I'd subjected all instances of Projekt W to. It was amazing how far you could push someone with a healing factor, really. Between that and the boost to his physical prowess the Rite of Union had given him even in his human form, it would have been shameful to struggle against a bunch of numbskulls stupid enough to only start fighting after their country had already lost the war.

"Well done, Lieutenant, Private," I told them. Giving praise when it was deserved was one of the pillars of good management. "Did you contact the authorities so they could dispose of the criminals properly ?"

"Well, we told the next checkpoint about them, yes," replied Grantz. "But, ma'am … I'm afraid I wasn't in a position to take prisoners …"

"That's not an issue," I assured him. "Your goal was to get the Sues to safety and you did. Besides, I doubt they knew anything useful."

"Um, excuse me," said the girl, still clinging to Grantz. Well, I could understand where she was coming from. For a civilian, being exposed to violence and the threat of death would be a shock : it made sense she wanted to stay close to Grantz, since he'd already proven his ability to protect her. "But, who are you, young miss ?"

I blinked. Oh, right. I looked like that, didn't I. I might have spent too much time with only soldiers and mad researchers if I forgot what the normal reaction to my appearance was supposed to be.

"I am Major Tanya Degurechaff," I told her, and watched her eyebrows rise in recognition of my name. "Now, Colonel Anson Sue has already been transfered to the ship's infirmary. Lieutenant Grantz, escort the two ladies to see him while Private Keller brings their luggage to their cabin. I made sure it's one of the closest to the infirmary. Now, I'm afraid Colonel Sue is still recovering, so I'm not sure he'll be awake to see you. Please follow the doctor's instructions regarding visits – it's for his own good, and Doctor Iosefka has little patience for people cluttering her workspace."

"Thank you very much, Major Degurechaff," said the older woman with a slight bow. "For this, and for everything you did for my husband."

"Think nothing of it, Mrs Sue," I answered with my most polite smile on my face. Manners cost nothing, after all.

"Please, call me Josephine," she said with a bright smile. I could see why Anson Sue had married her : back in my old world, she'd only have been slightly above my strike zone. "And I don't think it is nothing. You saved my husband's life, after all." Her smile dimmed as she went on : "And the Lieutenant may very well have saved my daughter's and mine as well."

"I was only doing my duty, Mrs Josephine," I demurred.

"Hum," the daughter called out to me, finally letting go of Grantz's arm – and I didn't miss the brief flash of disappointment on his face before he schooled his expression. I might need to run him through some lessons on how to behave properly around civilians after all. "P-please call me Mary too ! And, and thank you very much for looking after my father !"

I didn't mind admitting that it felt a little surreal to be thanked by the relatives of a soldier I had come all too close to killing and only really had spared for purely selfish and practical reasons. And I wasn't so thick-skinned not to feel a little awkward either.

"Very well, Mary," I told her. "Now, come on. Let's get you and your mother aboard so you can see your father."

---

*"Of the seven instances of Projekt U who returned from the Rhine Front having used Endlose Nacht, all of them broke regulations by feeding on their enemies during the battle, though the one deployed in the defense of the advanced headquarters only did so on human mages as opposed to the Republican Eikons. Due to the attenuating circumstances of being under the effects of Endlose Nacht, the Director has decided against inflicting any punishment on the Untoten for this breach of conduct, apart from a verbal warning she delivered in person.*

*All seven Untoten were run through the same battery of tests that was initially used to determine their capabilities back in the Projekt's early days, in order to check for any changes. The most obvious and severe is that all Untoten who used Endlose Nacht are now completely paralyzed when above (or under, as further testing has determined) large bodies of flowing water. Momentum is not cancelled by this weakness and full control returns immediately once the obstacle is crossed, meaning it is possible for the Untoten to fly above small rivers by angling their approach correctly. However, seas and oceans are completely impassable. The experience of total paralysis is accompanied by a mental shutdown : from the perspective of the Untoten, the time between its beginning and end passes instantaneously.*

*This side effect of Endlose Nacht (which appears to be permanent), combined with the lack of control shown while under its effects, has only reinforced the Director's determination to restrict the use of Endlose Nacht to the most extreme of situations. The proposal to dispatch Untoten to the Allied Kingdom and have them lay waste to their military infrastructure has also been tabled, nearly half of Projekt U's instances are now unable to reach the enemy nation on their own.*

*Other side effects have only been observed in the Untoten who fed upon the Republican supersoldiers referred to as 'Eikons'. The Untoten have reported that the blood of the Eikons was particularly delicious to their altered palates, though no two of them gave the same exact description of its taste. All of them, however, show pronounced black veins under their skin,*

*and have exhibited enhanced senses that they cannot turn off, making them vulnerable to bright lights and loud noises.*

*Unlike the weakness to water caused by the use of Endlose Nacht, those side effects appear to be weakening over time as their veins and senses return to the previously observed baseline. Based on our current projections, we estimate they should've completely faded within four to six months. Whether those effects would have manifested with only the ingestion of Eikon blood without the Endlose Nacht already present in the Untoten's system is a question that will remain unanswered for now, as we lack the materials to find a definite answer. In addition, such an experiment would violate the ethical guidelines set by the Director where the treatment of sentient Projekt instances is concerned.*

*Should new types of supersoldiers be deployed by the enemies of the Empire in the future, great caution is recommended in deploying Untoten using Endlose Nacht against them, as there exists the possibility that other side effects will manifest in a similar vein, and there is currently no way of restricting the bloodthirst of the Untoten while using the serum.*

*Further use of Endlose Nacht by Untoten who have already used it has been forbidden by the Director, as there is no telling what additional side-effects might manifest with repeated uses ..."*

Excerpt from an internal memo at Castle Schwartzstein, June 9th, 1925.

---

*June 18th, 1925 – Castle Schwartzstein*

"Your coffee is even better than it was back in military school, Visha," said Elya as she put down her mug.

"Thank you for the compliment," replied her old friend with a smile. It was reassuring that, despite all that had happened to Visha, her smile was still the same. The two of them were inside Visha's personal room in the castle, taking a moment to enjoy each other's company and catch up. It all felt very familiar, except Elya was the only one drinking, and there were no windows through which the sun could shine : the only source of light was the electric lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

To say that Elya had been shocked when she had learned what had happened to Visha would be an understatement. When she had realized that her beloved friend had died on the Rhine Front, she had almost completely broken down in tears, even though Visha had been right next to her at the time, in the Director's office.

The Director's attempt to calm her down had been … well, 'cute' was probably the best word. For all her immense skill at commanding people, Tanya Degurechaff didn't seem to be very good when it came to dealing with emotional outbursts.

In the end, Visha had been the one to calm her down, gently holding her in her arms until she'd stopped shaking. Elya had been slightly mortified to have reacted like that in front of a superior, but Major Degurechaff hadn't mentioned it and just carried on with her explanation.

By the end of the discussion, Elya's new job was to review Division Y's anti-spying protocols, as well as see if she could think of potential uses of the various Projekte for counter-espionnage purposes. The Major had been ticked off by the repeated evidence that there was a leak somewhere in the Empire, and was determined that the spies wouldn't get a chance to access Division Y's research itself. Having witnessed the terrible power of the Wunderwaffen in person, although at a safe distance, when she had deployed Projekt V against the Francois headquarters, Elya whole-heartedly agreed with that goal.

The Empire having access to that kind of weapon was already scary enough; she didn't want to imagine a world where every nation used them. As it turned out, that kind of perspective was exactly why Major Degurechaff had asked for her transfert (well, that, and the fact that anyone involved in deploying something like Projekt V had to be pulled into Division Y for safety reasons). Especially with how the Division was going to increase the scale of its operations, as High Command was willing to pour more resources into it after the stellar results it had shown on the Legadonian and Rhine fronts. As Degurechaff had put it, the best time to infiltrate an organization was while they were expanding and recruiting new personel, and there had to be plenty of parties interested with infiltrating Division Y.

Right now, Elya was still familiarizing herself with the inside workings of Division Y and meeting with its important and eccentric figures. Hence why she was here, drinking Visha's coffee and trying to relax. Really, apart from the ordinary soldiers working security, everyone in this castle was more than a little weird. She had to admire the Major for managing to keep things under control for so long.

Castle Schwartzstein was a strange mix of the modern and the ancient, which reflected Division Y's work as far as Elya could tell. Electric lightning illuminated strange rituals performed by the second and third sons of Imperial aristocracy in lab coats, and soldiers armed with rayguns kept watch over vaults full of occult reagants or patrolled atop the old medieval walls.

"The Major really likes coffee," said Visha with a wistful look as she refilled Elya's cup. "As her assistant, I have to try my best."

"You really miss her, huh," said Elya, truly making full use of the finely-honed investigative skills she had developed as an operative of Imperial Intelligence.

"I … Yes," her friend admitted. "I have been with her since I woke up, you know. It hasn't always been easy to adjust, but she was always there, and I found her presence … comforting."

"Like a baby duck imprinting on the first thing it saw as a mother," teased Elya with a smile.

"Elya !" Visha pouted. She didn't blush anymore, but she was still just as easy to rile up as before. "It's not like that. It's just … respect."

"Well, your beloved Major should be back home soon. And you know she couldn't take you with her this time, and it was best she stay with Doctor Iosefka until we're sure she's completely recovered."

Most people would have missed Visha's flinch, but Elya was both a trained operative of Imperial Intelligence and her best and oldest friend. She sighed.

"Do you still blame yourself for that ? Visha, there was nothing you could have done at Arene but die. You didn't have Endlose Nacht with you back then : the Eikons would have torn you to pieces."

Since part of her job was to strengthen operational security in the Division, Elya had been fully briefed on what had happened at Arene. Intercepted communications was her best guess as to how the Francois had known where and when the delivery of Projekt V would take place, but where in the chain of command the message had been read, and by whom, she was not sure. What she was sure about, however, was that the Major had saved Visha's life when she'd ordered her to leave after that first clash with the Eikon leader.

"I know that in here," said Visha, gesturing at her head. "But in here," she laid her hand on her chest, "I still feel like I should have died for good before allowing her to come to harm. I was her bodyguard, Elya. It was my job to keep her safe. And now, with that mess in Legadonia …"

Apart from the official channels, the two of them had also received information straight from the Major as to the partisan attacks in the former Entente territory. Visha hadn't taken the news that the Major had been so close to one of the attacks well, though Elya personally thought it would be a cold day in Hell before a mere mortal managed to harm the Director of Division Y.

"She will be home soon," she said, placing a reassuring hand on Visha's arm. "And I assure you, there is plenty of work to keep her here for a while."

Unless, of course, something else went horribly wrong with the war. But what were the chances of that ?

Chapter End Notes

AN : Look, Elya has been through a lot in the last few days. She clearly hasn't completely recovered yet, or she would never even think something like that.

Thank DeusVult for the suggestion of calling the canonically-nameless wife of Anson Sue "Josephine".

In other news, another three days, another chapter. This cannot possibly continue forever, so enjoy it while it lasts, folks. At some point, either I am going to burn down or the authorities are going to catch onto your goat sacrifices to the Muse and put a stop to them.

I have finally caught up with all 11 presently translated volumes of the LN. And without going into spoilers ... holy hell things are getting dark by Volume 11. Like, I look at the

state of Germania at the start of A Young Woman's Political Record and I go : well, this certainly is much better than canon. I mean, we all know that the Empire is fated to lose the war in canon from Andrew's POV in the future, but still. Why is it that my crack story with eldritch horrors being deployed against hapless soldiers comes out less grim in tone than the canon one ?!

At first I planned to write the scene of the attack on the car, but then I decided to change to how this ended up. If someone wants to write an Omake describing the "fight", go right ahead. Once Grantz got in melee range, it really amounted to a bunch of NPCs trying to rob a high-level character doing a side quest far beneath his level. As Tanya put it, not only is Grantz's human body boosted to the very peak of human potential, he has been trained by her, while his enemies were a bunch of disgruntled civilians with improvised weapons.

I might have gone overboard with Greger Klass' characterization. Then again, I would argue ultra-nationalism, where you refuse to even consider the possibility that your country might be in the wrong, is as alien and dangerous a form of madness as that caused by the Mythos.

Also, the conspiracy theory that the Empire arranged for the Norden Incident to happen in order to have a casus belli to invade the Entente is something that is mentioned in canon : a Russy Commissar tells that to Mary Sue, helping twist her already fragile mental state even further by giving her an excuse to blame her homeland's actions on the Empire. Again, to be clear : there is canonical evidence that this theory is absolute bollocks. The Empire had zero plans for invading Legadonia, and their entire military strategy relied on defense.

And yes, I nerfed the Untoten with the Endlose Nacht's side-effects. Look, you can't take a drug that gives you the powers of an VtM!Antediluvian and not expect some long-term, actually handicapping consequences. Mythos magic is dangerous stuff.

Not a lot of Eldritch in this chapter, I know. Don't worry, this'll change in the next one. I considered doing a time skip as the geopolitical situation progresses, but I felt it's a good opportunity to explore some aspects of the world in more details.

Speaking of Eldritch, any suggestion for a Projekt that could be used for spying and counter-espionnage purposes ? Yes, I am asking because with Elya in Castle Schwartzstein, the opportunity to diversify Division Y's activities all but write themselves.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and look forward to your reactions, comments, and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*IMPERIAL SORCERY USED TO CRUSH FRANCOIS PATRIOTIC SPIRIT !*

*The cruel occupation of Parisee continues, following the Francois Republic's shameful surrender in the front of the Empire's monstrous Wunderwaffen. Every street of the Francois capital echoes with the sound of Imperial boots, and the once-vibrant city has been silenced, its people living in fear of their new overlords.*

*Yesterday, as a group of Francois patriots protested against the presence of Imperial soldiers in their beloved city, they were unfortunate enough to cross the path of one of the cold-blooded Imperial mages, whose spells and guns took the lives of so many Francois soldiers on the Rhine. Without any hesitation or thought for the civilians surrounding them, the Imperial mage immediately used his computation orb against the protesters, inflicting a number of grievous injuries upon them, before they were immediately dragged away – not to the hospital to tend their wounds, but to one of the prisons the Empire has commandeered for its own use in Parisee.*

*Such was the shock and horror of the onlookers at the sight, they could do nothing but watch this latest example of Imperial brutality …*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Londinium Times*, June 7th, 1925

---

*BRAVE IMPERIAL SOLDIER SAVES PARISEAN LIVES !*

*After the wave of violent and reprehensible attacks across Legadonia earlier this week, it is now Parisee that has been plagued by those who refuse to accept the lawful surrender of their government.*

*Yesterday evening, in the middle of a crowded street, a group of Imperial soldiers were ambushed by partisans, who didn't hesitate to open fire with stolen military equipment, despite being completely untrained in their use. Fortunately, one of the soldiers they targeted was an aerial mage, and he was able to block their ill-aimed shots with a protective barrier before neutralizing them with minimal collateral damage and no civilians being caught in the crossfire.*

*Unlike the events in Legadonia, this appears to be an isolated incident, as there haven't been other attacks in Parisee. Nevertheless, the Imperial Army representative has reaffirmed the Empire's commitment to ensuring the current occupation of Parisee and the Francois military bases goes on as peacefully as possible. To that end, the captured criminals are being interrogated to find out where they acquired their weapons and whether they still have accomplices at large …*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Berun Post*, June 7th, 1925.

---

*TERRORIST CELL CORNERED AMONG THE PARISEAN DEAD !*

*Yesterday, in a combined operation with the police forces of Parisee, the Imperial soldiers tasked with ensuring order within Parisee launched a raid on the vast complex of tunnels stretching beneath the Francois capital (for more details on these tunnels' long and fascinating history, check our article on page 7). Units were deployed across the city to block the various entry points to the network, while a strike force was dispatched within the tunnels themselves. This operation was arranged after the investigation into the attack of June 7th revealed that the group responsible operated from within the tunnels, hidden from sight.*

*The details of this operation are still confidential, but we know that several Francois partisans were killed after refusing to surrender, and that some damage was done to the Parisean catacombs in the process. A Parisean policewoman was reportedly observed exiting the tunnels alongside the Imperial soldiers, one of whom was apparently wounded in the head during the battle.*

*In a joint press conference, the mayor of Parisee and Imperial commander declared the operation a success, and warned against the temptation of following in the cell's footsteps ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Berun Post*, June 17th, 1925.

---

*NOT EVEN THE DEAD ARE SAFE FROM THE EMPIRE !*

*In yet another breathtaking display of Imperial arrogance, the Empire continued its oppression of Parisee. No longer satisfied with their ongoing occupation of the Cathedral of Our Beloved Lady, the Imperial Army has turned its gaze upon the hallowed catacombs stretching under the Francois capital.*

*The Parisean police was forced to watch as the Republic's enemies ransacked the ancient crypts, unable to intervene lest they incur the ire of their conquerors. The citizens who sought refuge from the Empire's cruelty within the 'Kingdom of the Dead', as the Parisean catacombs are called by Francois poets, were mercilessly slaughtered under the gaze of their ancestors' eyeless skulls. The centuries-old ossuaries were left broken and scattered by the violence that disturbed their rest.*

*In their pursuit of soulless hyper-rationalism, the Empire has cast aside all restraint and compassion, and turned its Imperial Army into a cold, unfeeling instrument of violence. Nothing is sacred to the Imperial soldiers but conquest, and they'll stop at nothing in its pursuit. This latest outrage must remind us of the importance of our own struggle against the bloodthirsty legions of the Kaiser, for Albion presently stands alone against the Empire's tyrannical ambitions ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Londinium Times*, June 17th, 1925

---

*June 17th, 1925 – Parisee – Hotel L'Aube Majestueuse*

Lieutenant Willibald König, one of the handful of (living) aerial mages assigned to Division Y, sighed in exhaustion as he sank into a comfy armchair. The hotel suite that had been reserved for his team's use was far more luxurious than the quarters he had gotten used to in Castle Schwartzstein : the occupation force was bending over backwards to accommodate them, seeing it as a way to repay the Division's help in breaking the Rhine stalemate in some small way.

Having not had anything to do with that personally, König had felt slightly guilty about reaping the benefits like this at first. Right now, however, after the day he'd had, he really wanted to make use of the room service and get a taste of the delicious Francois wines he'd seen on offer before falling on his four-poster bed and sleep until the war was over. But there was still one last thing he needed to do today, and attempting it drunk would be incredibly dangerous for several reasons.

He checked his watch : he was just on time. Standing up, he clutched his Type D-24 computation orb and poured mana into it, establishing a sound-suppressing field around the room. Then, after a steadying breath, he focused on the device's secondary core, activating one of the spell formulas embedded within it.

Immediately, the temperature in the room plummeted, with frost forming disturbing patterns on the furniture. The light of the electric lamps flickered and took on a sinister hue, and König felt as if hundreds of spiders were crawling all over his skin. He swallowed the urge to scream and forced himself to complete the spell.

The air in front of him began to warp and bend, smalls dots of greenish light appearing from nothing and flowing like sand before stabilizing into the shape of what could generously be called a small humanoid figure that appeared to be sitting on an invisible chair, surrounded by tiny eldritch sigils that flickered in and out of existence seemingly at random. König adverted his gaze before he looked into the figure's eyes, which were the only thing the spell had rendered with perfect clarity.

"Major Degurechaff," he saluted.

*"Lieutenant König,"* the apparition replied.

Through the long-range Elder communication spell, the voice of König's superior sounded like a hundred infants screaming in pain at once, and König knew his own voice wasn't any better on her end. The Division was still trying to work the kinks out of the spell, but it was far too convenient not to make use of it in the meantime.

The spell didn't give off enough mana to be detected by military-grade detection arrays, and as far as they knew there was no way for anyone to intercept the communication – and if there were, then good luck to the poor sod who would have to try to decode it without the spell formula. To top things off, recording devices on either end were unable to pick off anything except wordless screaming while the spell was in effect, so he didn't have to worry about the room being bugged.

There were some limitations, of course, beyond the fact it looked and sounded like König was communing with an infernal spirit. Someone could still spy on the communication by being close enough to hear in person, hence the sound-suppressing field. The two computation orbs also had to be attuned to one another beforehand, and the person on the other end needed to be willing and able to cast the spell in turn for the connection to open. König's orb had been attuned to the Major's before his departure from Castle Schwartzstein, and he had been given a specific hour every day when she would make sure to be available for contact – with a very short window to get in touch before she moved on with her day.

*"Is the rest of your team here with you ?"* she asked. The spell would only show her König's own nightmarish projection, after all, just like he could only see and hear her.

"No, ma'am They are resting elsewhere in the suite. Everyone is fine, but I do have a lot to report."

And there was no reason to subject everyone else to the spell needlessly, he didn't say. Even veterans of Division Y didn't find that sort of thing pleasant, however useful it might be.

*"I have heard as much, yes. And a suite, huh ? I see you are being treated well. Take care not to get soft while you are away, Lieutenant."*

König shivered. As a mage and a soldier, he had grown leaps and bounds since joining Division Y, most of it due to the Major's training. Even so, he had no desire to give her an excuse to drag him through that particular hell again. "I assure you that won't happen, ma'am."

*"Good. Now give me your report, Lieutenant."*

"Yes, ma'am." König took a deep breath, and began his tale. "My team and I arrived in Parisee two days after our departure, on June 3rd, and immediately began our investigation into the origin of the Eikons as per our orders. The Francois sent someone to meet the four of us at the train station : Officer Sophie Jarnac, of the Parisean police force."

*"Was there any problem with the local authorities' cooperation ?"*

"None to speak of, ma'am. They aren't exactly enthusiastic about the whole situation, of course, but this whole business with the Eikons has them spooked. Imperial propaganda has been playing up how they did more damage to the Republican Army than us in order to play along with the Francois President's narrative, but that leaves the question of where the Eikons came from unanswered."

*"I see the Francois President hasn't been slacking in his efforts to pin the whole debacle on De Lugo,"* the Major mused before changing the subject. *"And how did Günther manage being out and about ? This is the first time we deploy an instance of Projekt P outside of Castle Schwartzstein, after all."*

"There weren't any issues with that either. He played the part of the gruff, silent soldier well."

Which was the best anyone could hope for. Günther couldn't speak : for now, only one instance of Projekt P had demonstrated that ability and she wasn't going to leave Castle Schwartzstein anytime soon. In his more lucid moments, Professor Gehrman, the chief researcher of the Projekt, was certain the others would learn eventually, but König wasn't holding his breath.

*"Good, good. Gehrman will be pleased to hear that. Go on."*

"Once we'd gotten the formalities out of the way, Officer Jarnac brought us straight to the Cathedral of Our Beloved Lady, where the Eikons were observed coming out of. The entire building was already cordoned off by Imperial troops when we arrived, as it has been since the Republic's surrender. They let us through once we showed them our credentials."

König didn't mention how nervous the soldiers had been when they'd realized König's team were from Division Y. Most of these soldiers were veterans of the Rhine Front, and had no doubt heard all manner of wild stories about the Wunderwaffen and the supersoldiers deployed to assist the Imperial Army. By that point, the fact that Division Y was responsible for their creation had inevitably trickled down the ranks, and the dearth of any concrete information about them had given birth to all sorts of rumors. But there was no need to tell the Major this : she'd warned him about it before he'd left Castle Schwartzstein, after all.

"As you know," he went on, "the Archbishop of Parisee vanished at the same time as De Lugo. The cathedral's personnel had already been detained, of course, but because no one was certain where to put them they were kept under guard within the cathedral itself. Officer Jarnac wasn't happy about us all carrying weapons inside a church, but I reminded her that her government had been the one to use the place as a garrison for their supersoldiers in the first place."

Which hadn't made her happy either, but it had stopped her complaints. Also, Günther hadn't burst into flames when they'd crossed the threshold, which König hadn't been one-hundred-per-cent sure wasn't going to happen.

*"Did you detect anything untoward within the cathedral ? From a mage's perspective, I mean."*

"Yes," he nodded. "There were definitely remnants of the Eikons' presence in the building. I took recordings on my orb for detailed analysis later, but to sum up my own impressions, it was like being near an explosion formula in the instant before it's cast, except diffused and faded."

*"That's a good comparison. They are pure forces of destruction forced into a semi-stable shape, after all. Unlike our own supersoldiers, I can't think of any peaceful use for them either."*

It was well-known within Division Y that Major Degurechaff always kept an eye on the war's aftermath. Every Projekt involving the permanent alteration of Imperial soldiers, or the creation of sentient beings, had to consider how they would be able to reintegrate society after the war. For some, like the Werwölfe, it was easy; for others, like the instances of Projekte U and P, the question was more delicate.

"We started our interviews of the cathedral's personnel, with Officer Jarnac acting as translator."

*"I chose you to lead the investigation because you speak Francois yourself, Lieutenant."*

"I know, ma'am. But I wanted to use this opportunity to check that she was playing it straight with us."

*"I see. Good initiative. And ?"*

"No deliberate mistranslation from what I heard. And the cathedral's staff were definitely more comfortable talking to her than us. According to them, every Sunday since the 3rd of May, the Archbishop ordered the cathedral's nave cleared. Twelve Francois soldiers would come in with him, and then after an hour or so they would go down into the crypts beneath the cathedral and stay there. The servants were made to carry food down there, leave it in front of the door, and come back a few hours later to take the empty plates back up. Everyone was told this was part of a special military project and that they weren't to talk about it to anyone. None of them even saw the Eikons until the day they left : a messenger came from the Ministry and barged into the cathedral in the middle of the night, and the Eikons flew out a few moments later."

*"So the Eikons do need to eat, or at least are able to,"* remarked the Major. *"That's one question answered."*

"We checked the nave, of course, but apart from the lingering aura of the Eikons there was no sign of any Elder-type ritual taking place – just the ones you'd expect in a religious building of that size and importance. None of the people we talked to appeared to know where the Archbishop had gone, either : Baptiste Beauvais just vanished at some point during the day following the Eikons' departure. Based on when he was last seen, my guess is that he left after the battle of the Rhine was decided, but – and I might be mistaken about this – before the news of the defeat reached Parisee."

*"... I see. If he was indeed the one who transformed the aerial mages into Eikons, then he might have some kind of link with them."*

"That's what I thought too. With our interrogations complete, we went to inspect the crypts where the Eikons had lived until they were activated by De Lugo. As per our orders, the soldiers who guarded the cathedral hadn't gone down there themselves, just in case. Apart from the lack of dust, there was no sign that forty adult men had lived there for weeks. The mana echoes were crazy, though, so they were definitely there, just … cleaner and tidier than any soldiers I have ever seen."

*"Eikons aren't natural beings. The power they wield came at a cost, that is for certain, and from what I saw when I fought them in Arene, part of that cost was their humanity. It honestly wouldn't surprise me if they spent the weeks before being called to action simply kneeling in prayer in front of the graves, completely unmoving."*

König tried to imagine that, and shivered at the thought. Division Y's supersoldiers had their quirks, yes, but they were still people. They moved, they talked, they laughed, and they got

bored, just like normal soldiers. What the Major was describing … it wasn't living. No wonder all reports about the Eikons agreed that they were crazy.

"We did find something else in the crypts," he continued. "One of the walls had been knocked down, creating an opening that led into what looked like an old mining shaft."

*"Please tell me you didn't go into the Parisean catacombs without preparation."*

"Of course not," König replied, before honesty compelled him to add : "Well, we were about to, but Officer Jarnac stopped us and told us of how extensive the underground network of Parisee is. Her actual words were something like 'we could wander down there for weeks, and if we got lost we'd starve to death long before finding a way back'."

Somehow, the hellish projection of König's superior managed to express how unimpressed she was without speaking a word. How the Major knew that a centuries-old mostly unmapped network of old mining tunnels spread out beneath the Francois capital, he had no idea – he certainly hadn't until Sophie had told him – but he wasn't surprised. You got used to the Major knowing stuff despite her age after a while.

"After that, we went to the Ministry of Defense to see what we could learn about the Eikons' creation process, and the circumstances of De Lugo's disappearance. The Francois had already done most of the work there : prior to the surrender, the Francois President had ordered an investigation himself."

Of course, they had double-checked everything, as it was all too plausible that some elements in the Republic would try to obscure the truth for one reason or another. The Francois loved paperwork almost as much as the Imperial bureaucracy, and though trudging through pile after pile of reports wasn't what König had in mind when he'd joined the Imperial Army, he'd done his job without complaints – and anyway, as the team leader, he was the one people complained to.

"What is clear is that, after the Eclipsed Liberation, the surviving Eikons flew straight back to the Ministry of Defense and met with De Lugo directly. The Vice-Minister chased off everyone and spoke with them alone for about an hour, then went to meet the President to explain what had happened in Arene. He didn't tell him where the Eikons had come from, only that they were some kind of secret military project, that they were the Republic's only hope of matching our Wunderwaffen, and made some not-so-subtle implied threats about the fact that they were only obeying him."

Frankly, the thought of a military leader threatening what was effectively the Francois equivalent of the Empire's Chancellor was unthinkable to König as an officer of the Imperial Army. It was possible the President was exaggerating, of course, and De Lugo had simply meant to imply that they didn't know if the Republic would keep control of the Eikons were he to be removed from his office as punishment for the Arene debacle or if the Eikons would go crazy in the middle of the capital. Although considering the Vice-Minister's later actions, any doubts he might have had regarding the reliability of the Eikons clearly hadn't held him back for long.

"We also seized the records of the Francois Army's magical detection arrays," he continued, bracing himself for what he knew was coming. "They clearly show the approach of the surviving Eikons on May 4th, but crucially, the mana signatures disappeared while they were in the Ministry and didn't pop up again until very early on May 26th, the day of Operation Shock & Awe."

*"Fuck,"* the Major swore, immediately seeing what König was leading to. *"They can turn back into human form, can't they ? And while in that form, their mana signature is suppressed so that it can't be detected with standard equipment."*

"It seems the most plausible explanation, yes," agreed König, feeling even less happy than his commanding officer at the prospect. After all, it was his job to find the unstable Francois supersoldiers. "Nobody in the Ministry saw the Eikons leave in their 'battle-form' after their arrival, and they aren't exactly discreet."

*"No they aren't. Damn. That's going to make tracking them a lot more difficult. I assume you didn't tell anyone else ?"*

"Of course not," he replied, offended she'd think he was that stupid.

*"Good. I'll pass that information to Brigadier General Zettour, but the idea of Eikons moving among the population undetected would not do public order any good. Shit, avoiding that kind of panic is precisely why I want us to keep all our supersoldiers under such tight control – what the hell were the Francois thinking ?!"*

"I don't think they actually knew, ma'am," König said cautiously. "From what we discovered, it looks like the President's public claims are true : the entire thing was being run directly out of De Lugo's office. He sent the reassignment orders himself after finding air mage units that could be pulled from the front or called from the reserves without weakening the Republic's position too much, and didn't tell anybody what he was doing with them. The people we talked with who knew the mages were being recalled assumed it was part of a plan to gather a strong force to punch through our lines in the hope of turning the tide of the war."

*"I see. You know, that idea actually makes sense. A highly mobile mage unit, moving under the direct command of Central Headquarters, able to be quickly deployed whenever it is needed ... I'll have to suggest that concept to General Zettour at some point, see what he thinks of it. It would certainly give Central Headquarters another option between 'send in more troops' and 'send in the Wunderwaffen'."*

König had to admit that the idea made sense, although you'd want elite troops to maximize its potential, and pulling mages from their assigned positions would be a bureaucratic nightmare. Aerial mages were just so useful that no commander worthy of the name would be willing to give them up.

*"But that's something to consider later. Continue your report, Lieutenant."*

"Yes, ma'am. Our next step was to investigate the tunnel leading from the cathedral's crypts. After Officer Jarnac's explanation, though, we couldn't go in there blind. Assembling a semi-reliable map of the tunnels beneath Parisee and find where the opening in the crypt led to

took us several days of trudging through ancient archives and tracking down the records of the renovations that were done in the last two centuries to keep the entire city from collapsing on itself."

*"It was during that period that the attack happened, wasn't it ?"*

"Yes, ma'am. On the third day of our research in the archives, when we left in the evening to get back to our hotel, a group of partisans laid in ambush waiting for us. They were using rifles from the Francois Army – we still aren't sure how they acquired them. Because of the potential fallout of using the M-912s in the city, let alone Günther cutting loose, I made the snap decision of using my D-24 to resolve the situation as quickly as possible and cast the Grasp of a Hundred Dark Hands."

König mentally congratulated himself for managing to say the spell's name with a straight face. It was the official name, given to the spell by the Denkmaschine when it had reconstructed it, but it was a bit too dramatic for his tastes, and those of the other aerial mages he'd trained with.

*"Why did you decide using an Elder spell in the middle of a public street was the correct course of action ?"*

"It was the one best suited to the situation," König answered. "The attackers were spread all across the street, and there were far too many civilians around to use standard attack spells. Furthermore, they weren't very good shots : the longer this went on, the higher the odds they'd hit a bystander."

And the spell, despite its name, was excellent for targeted crowd control. After marking the position of each attacker, König had cast it : shadowy tendrils had erupted from beneath the feet of the partisans, coiling around them with enough strength to break bone. He had dispelled the casting immediately, before the tendrils could completely crush the attackers – they'd needed prisoners to interrogate, and the sight of pulped corpses wouldn't have exactly helped with maintaining public order either.

*"Fine. You were the one on the ground, so I won't blame you for making the decision. What did you learn from the attackers ?"*

"None of them were willing to talk aside from hurling insults at us, saying we were all damned in the eyes of God and that the Empire would 'burn in the fires of divine retribution' for our unforgivable sin of fighting back against the Republic's invasion," König said in a sardonic tone. "But we did find out that one of them worked as a guardian of the Parisean catacombs. That meant there might be more of them hiding in the tunnels and using them as a base of operation."

*"It would make for a great base, I have to give these lunatics that. These tunnels reach out across a good portion of the city, and have plenty of entrances, don't they ?"*

"Yes. Most entrances are sealed to avoid accidents, but someone in that partisan's position could've obtained the access keys easily enough – and when we checked, we found out that

was indeed the case. The problem was, back when we'd inspected the crypts under the cathedral, I'd sensed mana traces belonging to at least on Eikon entering the tunnel."

*"So sending ordinary soldiers could've resulted in a massacre if there was still an Eikon down there."*

"Exactly. I coordinated with the occupation forces and the city police so that they'd guard all entrances into the underground that we knew off. I made sure the locals weren't left to guard any entrance on their own, of course, in case there were sympathizers among the force. It didn't seem likely, but I didn't want to take the risk."

*"You were right to do so. Annoying them too much would make the occupation difficult, but they still lost the war and should deal with it."*

"Thank you, ma'am. It took several more days to finish the investigation, set up the blockade, and prepare the map. Finally, on June 15th, my team and Officer Jarnac returned to the crypts and entered the tunnels."

*"Wait a moment. You knew the risks of that expedition. Why did you bring her along with you ?"*

"She was the only one who could read the map well enough," said König, shrugging. "The Imperial Army's cartography training focused on surface maps using Imperial standards, not those of underground mazes cobbled together from centuries-old documents. But Officer Jarnac has a knack for it, apparently, and none of us fancied being lost and having to blast our way out with magic."

They could've done it, too. Between the M-912s, his computation orb and Günther's whole deal, they could have dug their way out by just going up and blasting everything in their way until they reached the surface. With magic shields, they could have survived collapses, and the same oxygen generation spells that allowed mages to operate at high altitudes would've helped them avoid suffocation. But the damage would've been significant, and certainly wouldn't have helped maintaining order in Parisee.

*"Alright,"* said the Major, clearly coming to the same conclusion. *"Given the circumstances, that was probably the best choice you had."*

"Thank you. Once we left, I used the D-24's tracking spell to follow the lingering aura of the Eikons, while Officer Jarnac worked as our navigator, Günther held the rear, and Privates Seidel and Kuhn served covered me. Due to the possibility of an ambush, we advanced slowly, and took a break after several hours to rest. By that point, we had left the mining tunnels and reached the catacombs."

Which had been quite the experience. How the Pariseans could sleep knowing a place like that was under them, he'd no idea. Oh, he knew the history of the place : centuries ago, the graveyards of Parisee had been full, so they'd been emptied, the bones moved to the mining tunnels. Which made sense – you didn't want dead bodies piling up in the middle of your capital. But what had possessed the Francois of the time to arrange the remains of their long-dead compatriots into such morbid arrangements, he had no idea. They had passed walls

covered in skulls, pillars made of one specific bone taken from hundreds of skeletons, strange sculptures of impossible anatomies …

And of course, the tracking spell hadn't helped the ambiance at all. Like the Grasp of a Hundred Dark Hands, it was an Elder spell, and came with its lot of disturbing side-effects. Jarnac hadn't said anything, but her unease at the sight of the moaning, ghostly faces floating in the air ahead of König as they followed the Eikons' spoor had been evident.

"It was there that we eventually found our quarry. Half an hour after the end of our break, we started hearing chanting voices. We kept advancing with redoubled caution, and eventually we found the rest of the partisan cell – except they looked more like fanatical zealots than insurgents. They had made a temple among the bones. There were seven people here, kneeling in front of … well, it's difficult to put into words. The best way I can describe it is that it looked like an angel sculpture made of human bones, I think. They were praying to it, begging it to 'deliver Francois from evil'."

It had been disturbing to look at to say the least, and König had seen a lot of disturbing things since he'd been assigned to Division Y.

"We moved in and managed to neutralize them, and even took most of them alive. Unfortunately," König took a deep breath, "that's when the Eikon showed up."

*"So there really was one of them down there ?"*

"Yes, ma'am. He burst from behind the bone angel – there was a passage hidden behind it too small for his bulk, so he must have been in human form, which is also why I didn't detect his mana signature – and engaged us immediately. I raised a shield around us just in time to block his first attack, but I could only get it up around our group – the partisans died immediately in a wave of golden fire."

The Eikon had been fast, but König had trained by playing tag with vampires in the night sky above Castle Schwartzstein. His reflexes had been honed to a razor's edge, because nothing motivated you to get better at your job like the knowledge your 'training partner' considered your blood to be an exquisite delicacy. Yes, there had never been a single training accident where the Untoten had succumbed to their hunting impulses, but all that meant was that the aerial mages were quick enough.

"Privates Seidel and Kuhn opened fire with their M-912s, but the Eikon moved too fast to hit. He attacked again, hitting my barrier spell with his spear, and it started to break under the strain despite my best efforts." He blinked, trying to banish the terrifying image of that winged golden warrior howling in self-righteous fury as he tried to reach him. "At that point, Günther charged to engage the enemy in melee."

There was a pause as the Major digested what he'd just told her.

*"Did you order him to do that ?"* she eventually asked.

"No, ma'am. I was, huh, too busy focusing on keeping the shield up so the Eikon couldn't cut us to pieces or burn us to ash. He did it of his own initiative."

*"Interesting"*, she whispered, or at least that was how König interpreted the way the distantly screaming voices suddenly became fearful as well as pained. *"How did it go ?"*

"The Eikon immediately focused his attention on Günther, but wasn't fast enough to keep him from crossing the distance and start grappling. The two of them looked to be evenly matched in strength, and for a moment I worried they were going to shake the entire tunnel down on us. In the end, however, the Eikon managed to strike at Günther's left temple with enough strength to shatter his skin over a good portion of his skull. After that, well. The fight ended quickly."

The sight of what had happened next would follow König to the grave, he was sure of it. Before leaving Castle Schwartzstein, he'd been briefed on the details of Projekt P, of course – the Major would never have let him take command of Günther otherwise. But it was one thing to know the human appearance of the Projekt's instances was the fruit of careful workmanship reinforced through mundane and magical methods, and another to see with his own eyes what lurked beneath that shell, moving it like a man might move a suit of armor or a big paper construct at a festival.

"I managed to obscure Officer Jarnac's sight before she saw anything," he continued, shaking his head to focus on the present. "The Eikon perished through cranial penetration, and Günther retreated to the other side of the room, cradling his wound until Seidel covered it up. After that, we searched the partisans' bodies and the rest of the area. We found a few more weapons and a lot of religious paraphernalia, all of which we confiscated in case there was something interesting inside. Then we walked back, with Günther carrying the Eikon's corpse. By the time we reached the surface, it was a little past midnight today. We spent the rest of the day smuggling the Eikon's corpse to a secure location and spinning what had happened in a form that was palatable to the media."

*"That's one of the four Eikons who escaped the Rhine dealt with. Good work, Lieutenant. However, there are still three of them left. And the Archbishop may be capable of creating more, even without access to his cathedral."*

"We didn't find anything related to the actual creation process of the Eikons, but it was clear there were a lot of documents missing from his office. Even so, he'd need aerial mages," said König. "And those don't exactly grow on trees."

The Empire's policy of conscripting every individual with enough mana to qualify had given it the most numerous aerial mage corps in Europa, and even they only had a very limited number of mages to call upon. Before the horrendous attrition of the Great War, Francois had only recruited adult men, and there had been a definite pressure to only recruit 'proper' Francois into the ranks of the most powerful soldiers of the Republic. By the time of their surrender, they'd only just started testing and drafting women out of sheer desperation, but none of them had finished training before the fall of Parisee.

*"That is true, but not all Francois aerial mages are accounted for. Some of them disobeyed the surrender orders and vanished into the wild, or went with the ships that left Brest for the Allied Kingdom or the Francois colonies."*

"Do you think they would agree to become Eikons, though ? After what happened on the Rhine Front ?" asked König doubtfully. "I can't think anyone would volunteer to become an overpowered lunatic with no good tactical sense and a tendency to shoot his own side."

*"Not if their mind was intact, no. But from what you said of the way the partisans behaved, it seems the Eikons might be capable of influencing minds given enough time. If that's the case, we were lucky the soldiers of the Rhine were only briefly exposed to their presence."*

True, that. If that hypothetical mental corruption had been enough to drive the Francois to fight to the death, the last battle of the Rhine would have been a bloodbath. The Empire's victory would still have been inevitable, the presence of the Untoten with the Endlose Nacht serum guaranteed that. But the death toll would have been immense, and the vampires rampaging against the Republican soldiers wouldn't have done the Empire's image abroad any good.

*"Of course, there's also the possibility they'd dismiss the stories of the battle entirely and think them fabrications on our part,"* the Major sighed. *"Completely ridiculous, of course, but I've recently been forced to confront how illogical people can be when they think the pride of their country is at stake. In any case, there is a chance that De Lugo and Beauvais will reach out to the remaining Francois mages at some point. I'll pass that intel along to Central Headquarters. Anything else ?"*

"Günther will need to be sent back to Castle Schwartzstein for repairs. Right now, we are using a bandage to conceal the damage to his face under the excuse that he got hurt in the fighting" – which wasn't even a lie – "but all it would take is one slip-up for someone to see what's under the surface, and that would be difficult to explain."

Not impossible : the words 'classified information' said in a threatening tone had a magic all their own. But certainly awkward, depending on the time and place.

*"Send Günther along with the Eikon corpse and a copy of the documents you found in the partisan base. I will make sure Professor Gehrman is informed and ready for his arrival,"* said the Major. *"Now, about Officer Jarnac ..."*

König tensed, hoping he wasn't about to be ordered to 'silence' the policewoman for seeing too much before leaving Parisee. He felt the weight of his superior's gaze, all the way from wherever she was at the moment. He wished he could be certain it was just his nerves, but between the communication spell and the Major's own … quirks, for all he knew a balance might actually have registered it.

*"You will debrief her yourself,"* Major Degurechaff said at last. *"Make sure she understands how important it is that she sticks to the cover story. The people of Parisee don't need to know there was an Eikon under their feet, and nobody needs to know what's hidden under Günther's skin. In addition, lean on her superiors to see if she can be assigned to your team while you're in Francois territory. From your description, she sounds like a useful asset, and you'll need all the help you can get."*

"I will impress on her the importance of secrecy, Major," replied König, relieved.

*"See that you do. And just so you know, König, I wouldn't ask you to kill her. I'm not a bloody barbarian."*

"Of course not, Major," König lied through his teeth. "I never thought you were implying anything else."

*"Cut it with the cheek, Lieutenant. As I said, this is a good start to your investigation, but it's only a start. Continue your work to track down De Lugo, Beauvais, and the remaining Eikons. Focus on the Archbishop : see if he'd any contacts that could have helped their flight through Francois. The smear campaign against De Lugo means he's less likely to call on his own contacts for help."*

"Yes, ma'am. We are searching through Beauvais' correspondence tomorrow to see if there's anyone in particular he might have called upon for assistance."

*"Stay in Parisee for now. I'll send you backup to replace Günther once I'm back to Castle Schwartzstein – you'll need muscle capable of taking down an Eikon, just in case. Now that we know the Puppen can go toe-to-toe with De Lugo's pet monsters, I'll ask Gehrman if he thinks one of the others is ready for deployment. If not, I'll think of something."*

"Thank you, Major. We were lucky this time : the confined space kept the Eikon from flying off. I don't know how I'd have done alone against it in the air, even with the D-24."

*"When I faced their leader in Arene, I could have taken him down with my own D-24, and he was the strongest we've seen yet,"* the Major waved off. *"I'm sure you'd have figured something out. Still, there's no such thing as overkill or being overly prepared."*

König chuckled nervously. He'd no doubt the Major could take on an Eikon with only the D-24. But there was only one Tanya Degurechaff in the Empire, and he wasn't arrogant enough to think himself her equal.

"I will endeavour to be worthy of your high opinion of me, ma'am."

*"See that you do. Well, that's all from me. Contact me if anything else comes up. Goodbye."*

"Goodbye, ma'am."

The projection faded from existence, and the atmosphere in the room returned to normal. König looked at the water dripping from the furniture as the frost melted and winced. He'd have to give a generous tip to the cleaning staff tomorrow, but even that wouldn't stop them from talking.

Oh well. It would just be another rumor circulating about Division Y. For now, it was time for a warm bath, hot food, a good drink, and a comfy bed. After all, Major Degurechaff's training had empathized the importance of seizing every opportunity for some rest and relaxation.

---

*"The D-24 computation orb is the result of combining the early work of Division Y on Projekt D, [Denkmaschine], with the notes on orbal research that were sent to us following the tragic*

*destruction of Elenium Labs. After months of research, several iterations of the design, and extensive testing, we finally assembled a finished product at the end of June.*

*Unlike every computation orb currently in use within the Empire (and, to the best of our knowledge, everywhere else in the world), the D-24 employs not one but two cores, using the miniaturization techniques developed by our dearly departed colleagues at Elenium Labs. The first of these cores is loaded with the standard arsenal of spells used by an aerial mage : flight, shield, body and mental enhancements, optic and explosion formulas, illusions, etc.*

*It is within the second core, however, that the true potential of the D-24 resides. Constructed and attuned according to the principles that created the Denkmaschine, this core is loaded with reconstructed Elder spells, selected for their usefulness in the field. A full list of those spells and their effects can be found in report D-24-584, although while every D-24 computation orb is loaded with the complete list, not all mages carrying one are capable of casting all of them.*

*Aside from these unique spells, the two cores also allow the computation orb to process double the mana at the same time, which lets the mage use spells at a much higher output than a single-core design, or to cast more spells at the same time. Dual-casting, the practice of running a spell's formula using two cores at once, is also possible. Due to the adjustments done on the Elder core even standard spells tend to have unique cosmetic alterations when cast in this manner, though their practical effects remain unchanged.*

*While the notes of Elenium Labs suggest that with enough core, mana fixation might become possible, the D-24 is not capable of such, meaning the mage is still restricted to their innate reserves of mana instead of being able to store more within the device itself for later use.*

*Through the Director's training, all mages with the required mana capacity assigned to Division Y have learned to use the D-24 computation orb, although none but the Director herself can claim to have mastered its full potential. The intensity of this training (more details on the training of Division Y's aerial mages can be found in report D-24-601) was enough for all available mages to reach the Director's standards of performance. Even a casual observation of that training, however, makes it clear that applying it to the rest of the aerial mage flight corps is impractical and unrealistic, unless the Director withdraws from her duties at Division Y and dedicates herself to becoming an instructor completely."*

Excerpt from an internal memo at Castle Schwartzstein, August 4th, 1924.

Chapter End Notes

AN : And the streak of chapters being written far quicker than should be possible continues. This chapter is a little different from the previous ones, because the muse decided I should have a group of people wander in the Parisean catacombs, and so here we are. I'm not completely satisfied with how it turned out, but I hope you enjoyed it all the same.

I don't know if there actually is a passage from the Cathedral of Notre-Dame to the Parisian catacombs IRL, or even if the catacombs extend beneath it (probably not, if my quick wiki walk is to be believed). But this is the YS-verse, so if I want it to be the case, then it is. Because come on, how could I not have König's team investigate occult matters in Parisee and not explore the labyrinth of ancient bones stretching beneath the city's surface ?

According to the YS wiki, Wilibald Koenig is the full name according of one of the 203rd sub-commanders, which gives Willibald König once adjusted for correct German spelling. Do I regret having to add the umlaut every time I type his name ? Yes ! But I don't want my middle-school German teacher to be disappointed in me, so it's here to stay.

I trapped myself with the timeline, since I had already written the date of the investigation team's departure in an earlier chapter and Tanya had already left Castle Schwartzstein without (presumably) receiving their report. As a result, König had to pay the price of my mistake by spending several days drudging through hundreds of pages of ancient paperwork, the poor bastard. Although after going through Tanya's training, he probably considered it a welcome break. She might not have access to artillery for training mages purposes in this story, but she does have access to vampires.

Oh, and no, I didn't forget the complete overview of what Projekt P actually is in this chapter. Both König and Tanya know exactly what it is, of course, but you'll have to be satisfied with the cues I've scattered through the chapter for now. As for the D-24 dual core computation orb, a big thank you to the readers on SpaceBattles who gave me an overview of how orbal magic works in YS and just why dual-core technology is such a big advantage in canon.

I'm still considering where the story will go on the geopolitical scene from here, now that the Allied Kingdom is the only nation still at war with the Empire. I have several really cool "set pieces" I want to do, but I need to figure out a way to get there, and I'd rather avoid following exactly the same steps as in canon, especially since the story is already off the rails with De Lugo on the run without the Brest evacuation and the declaration of the Free Francois Republic in the colonies. If you have suggestions as to how the war could progress, please tell me in the comments ! You never know what random suggestion the muse will seize upon.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*PRIDE OF THE FRANCOIS NAVY SUNK BY ALLIED KINGDOM'S ATTACK !*

*Since the formal capitulation of our nation in its war against the Empire, the ships of the Republican Navy have sit in the military port of Brest. They had been gathered there in the last weeks of the conflict under the orders of the traitorous De Lugo, who it seems was planning to abandon the mainland and establish himself as military dictator of our colonies abroad should the Army be defeated on the Rhine, before being forced to shameful flight.*

*In accordance with the terms of surrender negotiated by our President, the ships were emptied of all but the most necessary maintenance crews, until such time as the Imperial Navy could formally take them over, and remained docked, while the sea-facing fortifications were occupied by the Imperial Army.*

*Then, yesterday at dawn, a fleet of the Allied Kingdom's Royal Navy launched an attack on the port of Brest. Squads of commandos sabotaged the guns of the forts watching over the docks, allowing the Albish ships to attack the docked ships of the Republican Navy with impunity. The Imperial aerial mages garrisoned at Brest immediately deployed in response, but they were too few, and while they put up a valiant effort and damaged several of the Kingdom's vessels severely, they couldn't prevent the near-total destruction of the Kingdom's targets. Dozens of vessels were sunk without firing a single shot in response. Due to the suddenness of the Albish attack, not all of their skeleton crews managed to escape, and over a hundred casualties have already been reported.*

*In his reaction speech, our President denounced this act, pointing how eager the Royal Navy was to strike at defenceless, Francois-built vessels, compared to their erstwhile timidity and reluctance to engage the Imperial Navy in open, honest battle on the seas they claim to rule …*

Excerpt from the front page of *La Flamme de Parisee*, June 24th, 1925.

---

*June 24th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

"Well," said Brigadier General Rudersdorf, looking down at the reports spread out on the table before him. "This is a fine mess. I told you we should have moved those ships to our northern ports."

"And I told you that if we tried to do that, the Albish would simply attack and sink them on the way. Besides, we didn't actually lose that much," Zettour pointed out. "The reason these ships were so vulnerable in the first place is that the Imperial Navy didn't have enough sailors to crew them. We've lost the opportunity to use them in the future, yes, but the resentment of the Francois against the Allied Kingdom for this perfidy will make things smoother for us in

the Republic. It's not like the Royal Navy came out unscathed either, and aside from their material losses, they'll have a much harder time getting the Republican exiles to work with them now."

In fact, Zettour fully expected some of the Francois vessels that had left Brest for Londinium to depart the Albish capital when the news reached them, even if they had to shoot their way out. They would probably make for the Republican colonies on the Southern Continent, where the military governors continued to only pay lip service to the President in Parisee and more or less reigned as ancient feudal kings. There were plans in the work to bring them in line, but there were plenty of problems with fighting a war across the Inner Sea, and it had been decided it would be best if the Francois President was the one to ask the Empire for aid – something he had yet to do, instead continuing his efforts to bring the colonial generals in line through diplomacy.

They could have pushed the man around, of course, but so far he had been surprisingly cooperative with the occupation, blaming the Republic's defeat on De Lugo to avoid public opinion turning on him (which was actually fair play, given the Francois General had been in charge of the Republic's armies). Thank to this, the Francois had begun to grudgingly accept their present circumstances, if only by virtue of pushing all the blame for starting and losing the war on De Lugo (conveniently forgetting they had overwhelmingly supported the surprise invasion of the Rhine when the Republic had joined the war, but Zettour was willing to let that slide in exchange for peace of mind).

And the Francois President was also already shaken enough by the news that there were still three Eikons at large within his country, and that they seemed to be capable of inspiring fanatical devotion within ordinary citizens if given enough time (after discussing the issue with Degurechaff, Zettour had allowed her team in Parisee to brief the President on some of what they had learned so far). The last thing they needed was for him to die of a heart attack caused by stress, because it was guaranteed they'd get blamed for his death if it happened.

"But without the combined might of our fleet and these captured ships, any plan to land troops on Albion itself becomes so much pie in the sky," continued Rudersdorf.

"I'm not convinced launching an invasion of the Kingdom's mainland would be in the interests of the Reich in any case, my friend," replied Zettour. "Logistical issues aside – and let me tell you, keeping an army supplied across the channel would be a nightmare in itself – it might just be enough to convince the Unified States to come to their cousins' aid."

And that would be a disaster. For now, popular opinion in the States was divided, with the vast majority not feeling inclined to send their sons and husbands to die in what they saw as a strictly Europan matter. That might change if they felt the homes of their relatives in Albion were directly threatened, and then the full industrial might of a country bigger than the entire Old Continent put together would aim itself at the Empire.

Even then, they might still win, but that would require deploying the Wunderwaffen on an unprecedented scale in order to force the other side to the negotiating table. Apart from the human cost of such a course of action, it would also tar the Empire's international image, perhaps irremediably so. Therefore, the best strategy for the Empire was to force an Albish surrender before the Unified States found themselves dragged into the war whether they

wanted to or not. After all, Zettour didn't doubt for a moment that the Foreign Office of the Allied Kingdom was working feverishly to convince the Americans to throw their full support behind Albion's cause in the war.

"Then how are we supposed to deal with the Albish and end the war ?" asked Rudersdorf.

"Diplomacy ?" Zettour suggested drily. "Unlike what happened with the Entente and the Republic, neither of us have sacrificed hundreds of thousands of soldiers to each other's guns yet. So long as the Kingdom apologizes for striking the first blow on the Rhine and makes appropriate reparations, there shouldn't be too much public discontent over ending hostilities before they escalate."

"That's all very good in theory, Zettour, but you might as well as for the Crown Jewels while you are at it. You know damn well the Kingdom will never admit fault. Have you seen the sort of nonsense their propaganda is claiming these days ? As far as the average rube in Londinium is concerned, we are evil, mustache-twirling villains hell-bent on crushing the entire world under our heels."

Zettour knew that his colleague was smart enough to understand that a certain degree of hypocrisy was inevitable when it came to nations pursuing their interests, but he could also understand why Rudersdorf wanted to grumble about it. The Empire had its own propaganda, of course, but it wasn't anywhere near as obvious and bald-faced as the Allied Kingdom's.

Then again, Zettour had to admit, so far the Empire was winning. If the tides of the war were to turn against them, he had no doubt the Imperial propagandists wouldn't take long to descend to the same level as their Albish counterparts.

"We can hold against the Kingdom more or less indefinitely," continued Rudersdorf. "Their blockade is hurting our industry, but we have conquered enough territories that we can keep it supplied, and the Francois farmlands will help avoid a famine so long as we are careful with rationing, and maybe put the Francois POWs to work; God knows there are plenty of conscripted peasants among them. But just holding the line isn't good enough, Zettour. They can draw on their colonial empire for resources and manpower, and if we actively try to cut them off we'll end up sinking an American ship at some point, no matter how careful our captains are. We need something else, something to convince the Albish that fighting us isn't in their best interests and giving up is the best option."

He gave Zettour a pointed look, and the other man sighed.

"It has barely been a month since the Republic surrendered," he bemoaned. "Are we really that pitiful that we need to call on Division Y for help already ?"

"We have other options," admitted Rudersdorf. "We could stir trouble in the Albish colonies, for a start. They have never been kind rulers, and we did just get our hands on a whole lot of Republican military equipment. But our analysts tell me that sort of things could escalate out of control quickly, and might cement the Allied Kingdom's determination to beat us no matter what. We could try to cut them off their Eastern holdings by making a play for the Canal. Or we can wait while our Navy builds up its strength using the shipyards of the Entente and the Republic along with ours and make a push for Albion then, or focus on aerial bombardment

of their industrial capacity to cripple them. But the more I look at this, Zettour, the more I think that using the Wunderwaffen may be the quickest and surest solution to this problem, and as an officer of the Empire, that means I have to consider it, even if it means swallowing my pride and asking for the help of a little girl and her pet monsters."

Rudersdorf expression sobered. "You saw the casualty counts of the Rhine and Northern fronts, my friend. If there is a way to avoid a repeat by knocking the Kingdom out quickly, then we owe it to the soldiers under our command to take it. They fought and died because they trusted us to do what was best for the Reich."

For a moment, Zettour saw it in his old friend's eyes : the same look of overwhelming grief and horror that he saw in his own reflection sometimes, when the hour was late and the weight of his responsibilities became almost too much to bear. And he understood where Rudersdorf was coming from, he truly did, but the other General didn't know as much as him about the Projekte still slumbering within Castle Schwartzstein. Zettour had no desire for the Empire to win the Great War, only to find itself master of a world of ruins and corpses.

And yet, at the same time, war was plenty horrible without the Wunderwaffen already. It all came down to a grotesque calculus of human suffering, and Zettour could feel it grinding away at his soul every time he made a decision one way or the other.

"I will send a request for information on potential uses of the Projekte to break the deadlock," he eventually gave in. "I'm sure the Major has already been working on that problem, so we'll see what she proposes."

"That's all I ask," said Rudersdorf with a smile. "She was in Legadonia when all that unpleasantness with the partisans went down, wasn't she ?"

In the days since that first wave of attacks, Legadonia had remained tense, waiting for the next one. There had been a handful of isolated incidents, but nothing like the coordinated wave that had targeted all symbols of the Imperial presence in the defeated Entente's territory.

"She was," Zettour confirmed. "She even got involved in one of the attacks on the mage POWs : ended up saving the victim's life, if you can believe it. She asked for permission to bring them back to the mainland for safety, and I authorized it."

"It feels strange to hear that she cared that much about an enemy prisoner," mused Rudersdorf. "She seemed as cold-blooded as any veteran when we were planning the Osfjord operation."

"Major Degurechaff is a complicated human being, that much I know for certain," replied Zettour. "She may a genius mage and manager, but there's still a child's heart in there somewhere, I reckon."

After all, she'd been the one to reach out to him, asking for permission to expand the numbers of Projekt W and for the corresponding increase in resources. Oh, she had couched her proposal in terms of 'making the best use of the Empire's human resources', but it was telling that she'd been willing to make the extra effort just to give the Imperial soldiers crippled in the war a shot at salvation. Zettour had accepted, of course : apart from the humanitarian

concerns, the campaign of the Rhine had more than adequately demonstrated how useful the Werwölfe could be.

Come to think of it … Hmm. He would have to spend some time considering the possibility of a squadron of submarines delivering a contingent of Werwölfe to Albion to act as commandos. Bringing them in would be dangerous, and they would effectively be trapped afterwards, but they could accomplish objectives far beyond what the same number of even the most elite unaugmented soldiers could ever hope to achieve.

If nothing else, seeing how Albion's propaganda handled having the Devils of the Rhine loose in its own backyard would make for entertaining reading. It was certainly something to think about.

---

"*Today, the agents of Division Y finally left the hospital. They took with them fourteen of our worst cases, soldiers who survived the Rhine Front by nothing less than miracles, but whose days are still numbered despite our best efforts.*

*For the last week, they moved in the hospital like grim-faced choosers of the slain, reading the patients' medical files and having quiet conversations with those still capable of speech. I have heard from friends in other hospitals that the same thing has happened there : in total, dozens of crippled and dying soldiers have been discreetly taken from their resting places and carried off.*

*Where are they taking them ? Everyone I asked was either unwilling or unable to answer my questions, and I find this unacceptable. These men bled and suffered for the Reich. We owe them whatever care we can provide, and if we cannot heal them then we owe them as dignified and painless a death as possible. All I have been told is that they have been selected to undergo some kind of new, confidential magical healing procedure. If that is true, then great, but why all the secrecy then ? There must be something more going on.*

*I know the importance of the work Division Y has done for the Empire, of course. I saw for myself how the flow of wounded lessened when they were deployed on the Rhine Front and their Wunderwaffen took the vanguard, even if I cannot help but think of the unfortunate Francois soldiers who faced them in the trenches. But I swore an oath to care for all my patients, and all this cloak-and-dagger business sits ill with me."*

From the journal of an Imperial Army doctor, June 1925.

---

*He is blind, and he is dying.*

*A piece of shrapnel took his eyes, at the same time another lodged itself in his spine. He cannot feel anything below the waist, and he knows from the whispers of the nurses and the stench of his own rotting flesh that this is a mercy. What he can still feel is filled with pain, but that is nothing compared to the knowledge that he will never see his daughter again; that she will grow up without a father, with only a few photographs and her mother's stories about him.*

*And so, when the man asks him if he is willing to risk what little remains of his life for a chance at healing, he accepts without hesitation. He has heard the rumors, after all : soldiers whispering that they recognize the mage-hunters of Division Y from Imperial mages who died on the Rhine, or the Werwölfe from cripples sent to the rear. Nothing substantiated, of course, but enough for him to desperately cling to hope.*

*There is training, and preparation. Days and days of waiting, being made to exercise what little muscle he has left, eating food that tastes awful but is supposed to strengthen him for what is to come. He can sense the tension in the air. Whatever they are going to do, it is dangerous and they all know it.*

*Then the time comes, and he is taken off his medication and brought outside. The stench of his lower body is almost unbearable. He can feel his heart weakening with every beat as his flesh struggles valiantly to endure despite the certainty of his demise.*

*He should already be dead. It is a testament to the strength of his caretakers' will that he has survived this long.*

*He hears chanting, and then there is pain. He sees without eyes, feels with his rotten limbs. He sees what lies beyond, in all its horrific glory.*

*It is too much. Too much. He cannot bear it. He wants to turn away, even if he knows that it will mean his death –*

*No.*

No.

*He will not die here.*

*This is the trial he was warned about, and he will not fail it. Even as the cosmic immensity of what he beholds threatens to unmake him, he focuses on the mental image of what truly matters : the sight of his wife, laying in bed and handing him their daughter, the most beautiful baby in the world.*

*The pain doesn't matter. The horror, the shock, the impossible things he is experiencing,* none of them matter. *He refuses to give up.*

*He will see his daughter again.*

*HE WILL SEE HIS DAUGHTER AGAIN.*

*The pain bursts into a star of white-hot agony, and still he refuses to give in. Something vast pushes around and inside him, but he does not break, does not relent. He is who he is wha t he is – a soldier, a husband, a father – and he will not let this break him.*

*And then the pain stops, replaced by a feeling of strength and acceptance. He knows, in that moment, that he will never be as he was before, but that he is still himself in all the ways that matter.*

*He stands, finding that he can do so now. He can move. He can walk. He doesn't hurt anymore.*

*And he can see again. Oh, but he can* see. *The light of the full moon and the stars is revealed to him in colors he didn't know existed, and he watches, mesmerized, the beauty of the night sky unfold before his new eyes.*

*He feels four wings stretch from his back, buzzing gently in the breeze. Wings ? The Werwölfe don't have wings, do they ?*

"*Well, well, well. What do we have here ?"*

*He looks down from the heavens, and sees a child standing before him. She looks so small, far too small to be wearing her custom-made military uniform. But before he can wonder why she is here, he sees through the sunglasses she wears despite it being night, his new vision piercing right through them, and he sees the swirling sea of stars that shines within her eyes, no less beautiful than the ones above.*

*The part of him that wasn't there before recognizes those eyes. He feels … not fear, no. Not affection either. The closest he can come to describing it is the respect he had for those higher than him in the chain of command, except this child is just a Major according to her insignia.*

"*You are a new one," she says thoughtfully. "We knew it was possible for the Rite of Union to result in something else, but this … Go back to your human form so we can check nothing went wrong."*

*He instinctively obeys before he can think he doesn't know how to do that, and stumbles on the ground, feeling the cold night air against his skin. He looks at his hands, at his lower body. He is naked but for the symbols painted on his skin, but there is no trace of the wounds that doomed him to a slow, lingering death.*

*He has done it, he thinks dumbly. He is alive. He is healed.*

*Maximilian Johann von Uger falls to his knees before the star-eyed girl, and weeps in joy and relief.*

---

*August 12th, 1925 – Castle Schwartzstein*

Sitting at my desk, I looked upon the final reports of our three-nights operation and its aftermath, and sighed. One hundred and forty-seven candidates, and we had only managed to get fifty successes. I had hoped our occultists would get better with practice, but I supposed there had to be a limit to how well we could do with candidates who were either crippled, dying beyond the ability of Imperial medicine to save, or both.

Over the full moon nights of August 3rd, 4th and 5th, we had been able to perform the scaled-up version of the Rite of Union the Denkmaschine had designed seven times each night, with each casting involving seven candidates and thrice that number of occultists performing the ritual. I had been on watch the entire time, with my D-24 in hand and a new

dose of Kosmosblut in my pocket, just in case something else that the symbionts that fused with the candidates to create new Werwölfe showed up. I hadn't needed to use that particular contingency, but I still had been forced to put down several nameless horrors that had arisen from the ruined corpses of those who'd failed the Rite most gravely.

I consoled myself with the thought that none of the men who had undergone the Rite of Union would have lived long anyway, but there was still a difference between dying in your hospital bed from war injuries and being torn to pieces by failing to survive the process that made new instances of Projekt W.

Of the fifty successes, twenty-four had been of the same type we'd gotten before, now nicknamed 'Phantom'. These would be the easiest to train, as we already knew a lot about their capabilities and had more experienced ones available to show them the ropes. For the rest, however, we had spent the last week exploring the supernatural abilities of their new forms.

The next largest group was nineteen members of what we were calling the 'Mirage' type, due to their ability to constantly appear to be just a meter or so away from where they looked to be. A pair of razor-tipped retractable tentacles emerged from their shoulder blades, they could fire beams of light that resembled the standard attack optic spells of an aerial mage, and in a pinch, they could conjure illusory copies of themselves and 'shuffle' their own position among them, perfect to escape or to regain the advantage in a difficult battle. They had silver-blue, gleaming skin, and two pairs of small eyes stared from a neckless head set deep between their broad, spiked shoulders.

The Phantoms and Mirages had been tentatively classified as 'Multi-purpose Battle Werwolf' : we could deploy them on their own against pretty much any land-bound foe, or in support of the Imperial Army as we'd done on the Rhine, and expect great results. The remaining three categories, however, were very different.

Five candidates had survived to become 'Spectres', and their abilities were seemingly designed for black ops work. They looked like edgy dark knights, except their armor was alive and part of them. Their touch was imbued with a supernatural freezing effect and they could summon a cloud of withering gas at will, against which gas masks and protective suits were no defence and which blocked vision for everyone but themselves and their kindred. That much was already terrifying, but the kicker was their ability to phase through solid matter like, well, specters. They could only do it for a few minutes before needing to recover, it didn't protect them from fast-moving objects like, say, bullets, and they were instinctively certain that trying to rematerialize inside a solid object would be a very, very bad idea unless they went in prepared to rend the object (or person) in question to shreds from within. Still, the possibilities for wet work were endless.

And then there were the unique cases, of which there were two. Colonel Uger, the highest-ranking soldier selected to join the Projekt, was one of them, having become a Whisper-type Werwolf (so named because of the soft sound of his wings in motion), and the only one capable of unaided flight, albeit far slower than an aerial mage (only slightly above 90 kilometers per hour). His powers were incredibly suited for reconnaissance. Not only did he have thermal and x-ray vision, he could hear a mouse running in a field and even pick up

radio signals. His transformed form had four arms, a pair of truly massive ones that could generate fleshy whips, and a pair of smaller ones ending in three-fingered hands that could carry things even as he flew. He could generate the mystical equivalent of a flashbang grenade from his torso on demand (which did nothing to his own senses), and could overload his wings to perform what I could only describe as a flying drill attack that shredded anything in its path.

The last remaining category was the Echo, named after his ability to use echolocation like a dolphin's sonar. The best way I could describe the one Echo we now had in our ranks was as a nightmarish cross between a crocodile and a white shark standing up on two legs. We had taken him to the lake, and he had demonstrated that, even if he was perfectly capable of violence on land thanks to his powerful arms and even more powerful bite, it was in the water that his full potential resided. He could swim at incredible speed, breathe underwater without problem, and the beams of greenish energy he could fire at will passed through water unimpeded. I could already see the Imperial Admirals salivating, although with just one of them, the best option was probably to keep him in reserve or assign him to mixed groups with a variety of skills.

All in all, the tactical possibilities presented by the new types of Werwolf were mind-boggling, and I had no doubt we would come up with many use for them in the coming days, although I had a hard time imagining we'd achieve the same kind of strategic advantage Projekt W had given the Empire on the Rhine Front again. Still, having more Werwölfe opened new options just by itself, even without the added bells and whistles.

Of course, I thought ruefully and with a self-deprecating smile at my own greed, if we had gotten more Echoes, then the latest request from Central Headquarters would have been much easier to answer. I had hoped we'd have more time before the Army came to us for help, and yet, here we were : with another letter from General Zettour requesting Division Y's help in breaking the current deadlock between the Empire and the Allied Kingdom. At least he was only asking for proposals for now, but I knew that, despite the letter's polite tone, the pressure would swiftly increase if I didn't send him back something soon.

Fortunately, I hadn't twiddled my thumbs since returning from Legadonia. Preparing the scaled-up Rite of Union and procuring the candidates had only occupied a fraction of my time, though making the whole thing work for the three nights of the full moon had required nearly every occultist on payroll to chip in.

"Visha," I told my faithful assistant, "please inform the researchers of Projekt S that their request for testing has been approved. We'll begin small-scale operation as soon as they are ready, with a view to deploy the Projekt tactically."

"Yes, ma'am. Is this about General Zettour's letter ?"

"Exactly."

Projekt S was our best option to break the Albish deadlock. It had the most strategic use (seriously, if we could get it to work reliably, it would change the face of warfare all on its own) and possibly the least potential to go horribly wrong (although a good propagandist

could certainly use it to stoke fear of the Empire, if not in quite the same way as the Projekte we'd already deployed).

It would still take some time before we knew if it would work. And until then, I planned to do some of the work that would be needed if the supersoldiers of Division Y (and myself as their commanding officer) were to have any hope of ever reintegrating civilian society.

---

*August 19th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

Colonel Eric von Lergen felt a familiar pain in his stomach as he looked at the proposal laying on his desk. It had been sent by Major Degurechaff herself, and it wasn't what he'd expected to come from Castle Schwartzstein.

It was a series of two-sided posters, with the left one showing a photograph of a wounded soldier (nothing too horrifying was visible, of course, thanks to some carefully arranged blankets and bandages), and the right one showing that same soldier completely recovered, reuniting with his family or enjoying some of the more pleasurable activities of life. Under the pictures was the slogan 'Division Y : Pushing the boundaries of magical healing for the good of the common soldier'.

The rest of the proposal detailed a plan to plaster copies of these posters in Imperial and occupied territory. Lergen didn't have a problem with the proposal itself. He knew from personal experience that, while the Werwölfe were utterly terrifying and capable of rending a man limb from limb in the blink of an eye, they were still Imperial soldiers, and really, not that much more dangerous than an aerial mage with a computation orb if you thought about it.

He still seriously doubted the Projekt would ever be used for purely medical purposes : there was just no way any society would feel comfortable about giving civilians the power to turn into terrifying beings capable of destroying tanks just to heal their injuries. But anything to make the supersoldiers of Division Y seem less like living Wunderwaffen and more like people could only be a good thing.

For one thing, it diminished the chances of panicked mobs rushing into Central Headquarters to kill everyone inside as apostles of Hell. Which was unlikely, yes, but not impossible if the people started to believe the wrong things.

But why had the proposal been sent to him for consideration in the first place ? Shouldn't General Zettour, as the patron of Division Y among the Imperial Army's top brass, be the one to decide whether to approve this for publication or not ?

A nasty suspicion began to form in his mind. He'd told Zettour about his confrontation with the Albish colonel in details upon his return from the Rhine front, including Sergeant Barchet's speculations as to how the Allied Kingdom might interpret it. Given the mounting evidence that the Kingdom had breached the Empire's security and was furiously investigating Division Y and the Wunderwaffen, was General Zettour playing on their misconceptions as to Lergen's own role with Degurechaff's organization in order to throw the Albish spies off-track ?

On the one hand, he didn't appreciate being used as bait. On the other hand, anything that kept the Allied Kingdom from learning the secrets of Division Y was an objectively good thing for the Empire, and perhaps the entire world. On the other *other* hand, he really, really didn't want to get involved with Division Y and Degurechaff's kind of genius insanity if he could help it.

He sighed. He really could use a stiff drink right now, even if it was still early in the day. Unfortunately, his doctor had strongly but respectfully (in that way military doctors were very good at when talking to someone as high-ranked as Lergen) recommanded him to cut down on his alcoholic consumption until his stomach ulcer had time to heal.

He marked the forms with an approval stamp, signed them, and prepared them for shipping to the Office of Propaganda. With any luck, he was just being paranoid and General Zettour was just too busy with his many other duties to handle that seemingly minor request from Degurechaff.

… and if he told himself that enough times, maybe he would believe it, too.

Chapter End Notes

AN : A bit of a shorter chapter, but you got it in two days, so complainers will be sacrificed to the Muse.

Also, if you want to know what the new Werwolf types look like, google "Cthulhu Tech Tager lineup", or hop over on SpaceBattles, where I have put images inside this chapter's equivalent. Now onto the story.

Yes, I gave Uger a bonus on his roll to survive the Rite of Union thanks to the Power of Love. Based on the original CthuluTech lore for the Tagers, I am pretty sure it would work (although characters in that game START play as Tagers, and I don't think there are rules for becoming one later during the campaign). Also, I kept being haunted by the thought that without Tanya to send him to a nice, safe posting in logistics, he would most definitely end up on the frontlines, where his character would not be best suited to his survival. And his character is a walking ball of decency and competence in the LN, so there : one small miracle amidst the horrors of total war, paid for in magic, mystical reagants and blood.

For those interested, here are the summoning rates for Tager creation, from the source material Ancient Enemies :

Common (Mirage, Phantom) : 80%

Specialist (Echo, Shadow, Spectre, Whisper) : 17%

Exceptional (Nightmare, Vampire) : 2%

Rare (Efreet, Widow) : 1%

So basically, Tanya rolled the gacha 50 times and didn't get any rare or exceptionnal pulls. Out of story, of course, the reason is that I don't want to introduce such powerful Werwolf sub-types into the story yet. In-story, well, with 3% odds of getting one of the two upper categories for every successful transformation, my quick-and-dirty math tells me that is rather unlikely ((97/100)^50, giving 21% odds of not getting a single one, which isn't impossible, but still), so I am going to say that the above percentages were fudged by the fact every subject was in less-than-optimal physical condition, which might be required to survive union with the more powerful symbionts. Essentially, the rare pulls ended up killing the host instead. Or maybe those symbionts are a bit too alien and/or brutal for the mind of an early XXth-century soldier to willingly fuse with, as opposed to someone living through the Aeon War.

Or maybe Tanya just has terrible gacha luck. That's certainly also an option.

As for the fifty who made it through, I decided to delegate that to a dice simulator (D100, 40% Phantom, 40% Mirage, and 5% each for Echo, Shadow, Spectre and Whisper). I was lucky to end up with just one Whisper, which was the type I wanted Uger to be. No Shadow at all, but 5 Spectres isn't bad.

The 1/3 survival rate is based on the only solid figure I could find in the source material. When the Rite of Union was used for the first time, 2 out of 6 participants survived. Of course, that's far too small a sample to get any reliable data out of, and they refined the selection and training process afterwards but I'm also assuming using crippled soldiers who have only gone through a month of preparations while mostly being drugged out of their minds on painkillers isn't exactly good for their success chances. Whether making them the offer is a good, humane and/or ethical thing to do knowing they'll either completely recover (including the eldritch equivalent of a miracle cure for PTSD, as the eldritch symbiont alters the mind of the host enough that they are no longer traumatized by what happened to them) or be horribly eaten alive by something from beyond, I leave as an exercise to the reader.

In Uger's position, knowing it was the strength of your will that would determine the outcome, what would you have chosen ?

Also, I hadn't planned on König and his team visiting the Francois President to tell him about the Eikons' mind-warping ability, but it slipped into the text and now I really want someone to write an Omake of König at the not!Palais de l'Elysée terrifying the Francois President with his casual attitude as he describes the horrific possibilities lurking in Francois' future.

Finally, does anyone have a suggestion for a name I could use for Not!Egypt ? So far it has only been referred to by Merlin as The Land of the Pyramids, but somehow I doubt I could justify having that written on a map. And yes, this question does mean the action will move to the Southern Continent pretty soon.

Alright, that's all for today. As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I look forward to your reactions and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*PARISEE OCCUPIED : LIFE GOES ON*
*by War Correspondent Jeremiah Smith*

*It has now been over ten weeks since the surrender of the Francois Republic to the Empire, and the beginning of their capital's occupation by the Imperial Army. As the Francois get used to the sight of Imperial soldiers patrolling their streets, the mood within the Republic has slowly but surely begun to shift. Memorial ceremonies held for fallen soldiers have been attended by Imperial officers, who publicly praised the resolve and courage of the hundreds of thousands of Republican men who died in the Rhine, while also hoping that the sheer brutality of this conflict will serve as a salutary lesson to both nations in the future. To quote one Imperial Colonel :*

*'The lure of glory, used to incite so many young men to join the armed forces, died in the mud of the Rhine along with so many of its victims.'*

*Slowly but surely, life has begun to return to normal in Parisee, although the absence of so many young men dead on the fields of the Rhine can be painfully felt. Imperial investments have begun to pour into the Republic, as the Empire looks for manpower to compensate for the pressure put on its own population by the growth of its Army. As part of a new agreement reached between the Francois President and the Empire, thousands of Republican soldiers have been released and sent back to the fields of the Republic to ensure neither nation suffers from a food shortage in the near future.*

*At the same time, while tensions between the Empire and the Republic are slowly dissipating, the old rivalry between the Republic and the Allied Kingdom has been revived by the Albish attack on Brest. With the blame for joining the war laid at the foot of De Lugo and the rest of the Republic's military high command (most of whom either died during the Imperial destruction of the Republic's headquarters on the Rhine Front or are currently held prisoner by the Empire), much of the people's anger has redirected itself onto Albion.*

*The Allied Kingdom, after joining the war far too late to assist the Republic (and doing so with a surprise attack on the Imperial's advanced command post that failed miserably) won its first major victory by sinking defenceless Francois ships in the Brest harbor. As a result, one can often hear talk in Pariseean bars of how the locals look forward to the Empire 'teaching a lesson to perfidious Albion with their Wunderwaffen for a change' ...*

Excerpt from the Unified States newspaper *The Philadelphia Gazette*, August 20th, 1925.

---

*IN THE SHADOWS OF EUROPA : THE SECRET WAR*

*Though the Francois government blames Pierre-Michel De Lugo for its defeat, this is nothing but a polite fiction both Republic and Empire have agreed upon in the name of maintaining public order. The true reason for the crushing Francois defeat lies with the mysterious Wunderwaffen, first unleashed by the Empire against the Dacian Army nearly a year ago.*

*Much has already been written about these superweapons, but as one might expect, the Imperials are keeping their cards close to their chest and concrete details are few and far between. Even so, compiling the testimonies of soldiers who survived the Rhine Front and are willing to revisit such dreadful memories in exchange for another round of beer, one can discern certain undisputable facts.*

*The existence of the undetectable aerial mages is undeniable, of course. Then there are the Devils of the Rhine, whose pictures reached our shores even before the Fall of Francois. Opinions are still divided on whether their terror-inducing appearance is the fruit of illusion magic or chimerical experimentation, but their effectiveness on the modern battlefield cannot be denied. More mysterious is the strange fog that was observed by the citizens of Os in Legadonia during the Imperial attack on the Osfjord, and which cut all radio communications between the city and the Entente soldiers stationed within the fortifications. Then there is the weapon which destroyed the Francois military headquarters on the Rhine Front : to this day, the entire area is quarantined by the Empire.*

*From all of this, it is clear that warfare has entered a new era, one in which magic, brought back into focus by the invention of the computation orb, will play an even greater role than before. And the Empire, ever a pioneer of magical research, isn't the only nation to walk this road.*

*The Francois President claims to have no knowledge of where the Republic's own superweapons, called Eikons by the Imperial Army (and most of the Republic after their initial name of Holy Knights lost its appeal following the disaster of their deployment on the Rhine), came from. This might seem unlikely, but one must remember that, while the scope of their responsibilities may differ, the office of President in the Francois Republic is limited in time, just like ours. Surely such a research program must have taken much longer than the handful of years between popular votes, and thus needed to be kept separate from the vagaries of politics until it was needed.*

*Even now, despite the Francois Republic's surrender, the hunt for the Eikon research program continues. Operatives of the ever-mysterious Division Y, rumored to be responsible for the development and deployment of the Wunderwaffen, have been sighted in Parisee, working with the civilian authorities to locate the disgraced De Lugo and the Francois researchers. A few days after the so-called operation in the Pariseean catacombs, a Major said to be working for Division Y was seen walking out of a meeting with no less than the Francois President himself. And there are rumors, too, that not all Eikons were slain at the Battle of the Rhine.*

*As this shadow war continues under the surface of the public conflict, this reporter cannot help but wonder. How many other nations across the globe have been pursuing magical superweapons in secret in the last decade ? Has our own government researched such devices in hidden facilities ? Certainly the size of our country compared to that of the*

*Europan nations would make it easier to build such secret laboratories. Our government's refusal to answer the question one way or another can also be taken as evidence ...*

Excerpt from the Unified States newspaper *The National Truth*, August 21st, 1925.

---

From : Major Tanya Degurechaff

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : Projekt S

Date : August 24th, 1925

*Brigadier General,*

*The initial tests of Projekt S have been successfully completed. We have encountered no unforeseen difficulties, and our team has gained valuable experience in handling the Projekt's delicate controls.*

*As per the agreed-upon plan, we will soon begin testing our ability to reach Londinium itself with Projekt S. Of course, all safety and security precautions will be taken to ensure no threat to the Reich presents itself.*

*I shall contact you with the results as soon as possible in order to prepare the next phase.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*"We are out of time. Division Y is going to hit Londinium soon, we don't know what with. Get the wards up NOW. We will worry about the costs and consequences later."*

Private communication between Agravain and Merlin, members of Albion's Round Table.

---

*"Beginning final checks. Everyone sound off."*

*"Power source, check."*

*"Security forces, check."*

*"Elder wards, check."*

*"Final review of the coordinates' calculations, check."*

*"Vanguard aerial mage, check."*

*"Everything is ready, Director."*

*"Then begin activation of Projekt S, test number eleven, target : Londinium."*

*"Beginning activation process. Imputing coordinates now."*

*"Coordinates confirmed. Sending power to catalyst array."*

*"Spatial dislocation confirmed within the gateway. Disruptions are within safety parameters ... wait. Something is wrong !"*

*[Various alarms begin to ring, along with various sounds that the recording fails to properly render.]*

*"We are getting some kind of feedback ! The coordinates are being scrambled !"*

*"Is that ... an ankh symbol in the gate ? What the hell ?"*

*"Focus ! It must be a protection of some kind !"*

*"Shit ! The control panel is melting !"*

*"Cut down the power ! Shut it down, now !"*

*"No, wait ! Look, it's stabilizing !"*

*"Wait. Wait ... Are we still getting any readings ?"*

*"No, ma'am. The machine is fried. We can't see what's on the other side, and we can't change the coordinates anymore."*

*"I can go through, Major."*

*"Neumann ?"*

*"We need to know where it leads : anything could come through from the other end. If I keep my shield and oxygen spell, I should be able to survive no matter the conditions on the other side long enough to radio in or rush back, right ?"*

*"... Alright. Be careful."*

*[Several moments of noisy activity, then a brief flash of white noise. When Lieutenant Neumann's voice is heard again, it is laden with static.]*

*"This is Neumann. I am through. Shield and oxygen spells are holding, although it's taking a bit more effort than usual. The gateway led onto solid ground. There are what appear to be ruins all around me, with no sign of life. The sky is ... the sky ..."*

*"Lieutenant Neumann ?"*

*"The ... the sky ... THE SKY IS BROKEN ! THE SKY IS - AAAAAAAH !"*

*"Lieutenant Neumann ? Lieutenant Neumann ?!"*

*[Further incoherent screaming.]*

*"Fuck ! Visha, with me ! Security, bring your guns to bear on the gateway and shoot anything that comes out that isn't one of us !"*

*"Director ?!"*

Excerpt from the audio logs of Projekt S, [Silberschlüssel], first transcontinental testing (intended destination : Londinium outskirts), August 26th, 1925.

---

*August 26th, 1925 – ???????????*

In hindsight, I reflected, diving through the warp gate that was the centerpiece of Projekt S might have been a rash decision.

However, it had been my decision to send Neumann through the portal, despite knowing damn well what exposure to the Mythos could do to a sane individual like the Lieutenant, who lacked the advantage my memories of my old world provided me in somewhat making sense of the cosmic horror with which Division Y tangled daily. That made whatever happened to him my responsibility. In addition, Neumann was too useful a subordinate to lose like that.

I emerged from the swirling maelstrom of un-sounds and impossible colors to find myself surrounded by what looked like some kind of futuristic megalopolis that had gone through several apocalypses in quick succession and then left to decay and gather dust for a handful of aeons. I shook my head to free it from the after-effects of going through the gateway – Projekt S was the result of feeding some ancient notes on old ritual stone circles to the Denkmaschine, and early tests had shown that one needed a strong stomach to avoid being incapacitated once you got on the other side.

Neumann was there, staring up with wide eyes, his mouth moving without making any sound. He'd dropped his shield and oxygen spells, but was still alive, so clearly our surroundings weren't as dangerous as I'd feared.

I punched him in the belly, reinforcing my arm with magic. Despite being almost twice my size and several times wider, he folded in two like a piece of cheap cardboard, and I seized him by his lapels with one hand while removing my sunglasses with the other before looking him straight in the eyes.

"Lieutenant Neumann !" I barked in my best commanding voice. "Pull yourself together !"

I didn't feel good about using my eyes' mind-bending ability like this, but Colonel Lergen had proven that it was possible for strong-willed individuals to avoid being permanently affected. Neumann was a soldier and a veteran of Division Y : I was hoping the shock of exposure to my eyes would reboot his brain, so to speak.

My gamble paid off. He blinked several times, shook his head, then let out a strangled "yes ma'am". Relieved, I let go of his clothes and risked a look up myself, steeling myself for what had shocked him like this.

It wasn't as bad as I had feared (no leering, sun-sized faces or tentacled stratosphere reaching down hungrily for us), but it was still quite the disturbing spectacle. Neumann's panicked screams had been right. The sky was indeed broken. The sunless heavens glowed with a uniform red glow, and impossibly vast faultlines ran across them from horizon to horizon. Fortunately, Visha was wearing her sunproof uniform, just in case the researchers had messed up the coordinates and opened a portal somewhere sunny.

A whirring and ticking noise drew my attention down from the eldritch skies and to my pocket. Frowning, I pulled out my watch, and saw that the hands were moving erratically, jumping all around the clock forward and backward. For a moment I entertained the thought that this was the result of some magnetic field, but the fact that the other metal bits on my person weren't affected forced me to confront the obvious : wherever it was the gateway had delivered us, it was a place where time (and, judging by the skies, space) didn't work as we were used to.

"Neumann," I asked, "can you still make contact with the other side ?"

"I …" He blinked, and put the radio transmitter up. "This is Neumann. Can you hear me ? … I'm with the Major and Lieutenant Serebryakov." He looked at me and nodded.

"Ask them how much time has passed since we got through," I told him. He repeated my query with a raised eyebrow, and when he told me less than five minutes had passed, I sighed in relief.

"Keep the radio channel open at all time," I ordered him. "Tell them to talk to you constantly – I don't care what about, they can just count numbers for all I care."

For all I knew, the constant exchange was the only reason time was synchronized on both sides of the portal. At least the D-24 still worked : given how complicated a piece of machinery it was, my best guess was that the Mythos aspects of its secondary core were shielding it from temporal anomalies.

"Major," said Visha urgently, "I can sense magic users approaching."

Now that she had mentioned it, I could feel them too. The mana signatures were much weaker than the ones I was used to look for as an aerial mage, but they were unmistakable.

A moment later, the source of these signatures revealed themselves, emerging from the ruins at a careful distance from us. To my surprise, they were clearly humans, except with skin tones varying between a dark grey and obsidian black, with elaborate red and white tattoos visible on their exposed skin. Their features looked like a mix of Caucasian and Asian traits, beautiful despite the dust caking them. All of them had red eyes that gleamed in the half-light of the broken sky like those of a cat, and they moved with a grace that was almost feline as well.

"Are those colonials ?" asked Neumann hesitantly.

I shot him a disbelieving look, wondering if he was seriously comparing the new arrivals to the human ethnicity native to the Southern Continent (for which the term he had used,

'colonials', was frankly the least offensive one commonly used in the current era, though it referred to all indigenous people of the other Europan powers' colonies).

Then it hit me : Neumann hadn't grown up in the same cosmopolitan era I had, where movies, TV shows and even just the daily news meant everyone was exposed to Humanity's incredible diversity. There were people of color in Europa, of course – only morons and the historically illiterate of my old world would've thought the continent to be solely populated by whites in the early twentieth century – but apparently there was a difference between that and knowing that the skin color of these folks wasn't something natural.

Then again, given the eldritch skies, it could very well be a natural pigmentation, for a given value of 'natural'. It wasn't as if I was an expert : I just knew nobody on my old world had that particular skin color.

Of course, I wasn't going to let something as small as the color of their skin affect how I treated them. I was, after all, a rational, peace-loving and civilized individual, not a character written by a man with so many psychological issues he had to rely on a frankly comical level of racism in order to prop up the fragile edifice of his self-esteem.

I counted twenty or so of them, dressed in exactly the sort of ragged clothing I would expect from a post-apocalyptic tribe scavenging for survival in the ruins of a once-mighty civilization. Half of them held spears and other weapons, while the other half, the ones giving off the mana signatures Visha had first detected, had kept their own weapons sheathed (most likely those were backups for when they ran out of mana).

"We mean you no harm," I shouted in their direction, holding my hands up. With the D-24 that meant far less than it normally would, but I was hoping they would recognize the gesture's intent. "We come in peace."

One of them shouted something back, which unsurprisingly I didn't understand. It would've been too much to hope they spoke Imperial, Albish, or Japanese. Still, whatever it was hadn't sounded too hostile, so I kept hoping we could avoid any misunderstandings. For once, my appearance as a young girl should play in our favor.

Perhaps we would have managed to establish a dialogue, but before that could happen, the air shook with a monstrous, terrifying shriek. I turned toward the source of the sound, and froze as I saw something vast and impossibly ugly fly in our direction on leathery wings.

It resembled a dragon in the same way the Kinder had resembled goats. With the enhanced vision my use of Kosmosblut had left me, I could see it in details, and wished I couldn't. It had four limbs, a tail, two wings, and something resembling purple fire was burning inside a cavity on its front end, but there the similarities with the beast of myth the Empire used on its heraldry ended. Its body looked to be made of rotting flesh pulsating with disgusting vitality, with yellow bones emerging from the mass seemingly at random. Its face was like that of a grotesque, enormous toad, except it had five eyes placed without any symmetry.

The locals were already fleeing. Unlike the three of us, they hadn't wasted time standing slaw-jacked and watching the monster approach : they had immediately broken up in groups, each running in a different direction. I had a feeling I was witnessing a survival method

developed over countless interactions with the beast : one of the groups wouldn't make it as it drew the creature's attention, but their sacrifice would buy enough time for the rest to escape.

Neumann, who had faced enough escaped summons and failed experiments in his time assigned to Division Y, didn't wait for my orders and opened fire with a long-range attack spell. Under the circumstances, it was a remarkable shot, striking the beast right in what I guessed was its head, with enough strength to burst a bunker open.

When the smoke dissipated, it became clear the attack hadn't done anything except draw its attention to us. Next to me, Neumann let out a strangled sound of dismay.

I really, really wanted to run back to the portal and back to Castle Schwartzstein. Unfortunately, I couldn't. Not only would running away damage my image in the eyes of Visha and Neumann, and then the rest of Division Y as word of my cowardice spread, but while I doubted it could fit through the gateway, whatever equivalent of a fiery breath it possessed just might – it wasn't as if we had tried firing a flamethrower at it during our tests.

With how many people were on the other side of the gateway – all of whom I was responsible for and whose deaths would be on my head – the choice was obvious. Painful, but obvious.

"Fall back," I commanded Visha and Neumann, pulling the injector I had kept on my person since our scaled-up performance of the Rite of Union during the last full moon out of my pocket.

"Major ?" exclaimed Visha. Are you sure ? I've a dose of Endlose Nacht on me, I can …"

"That won't be enough," I cut her off. I had already considered it, but that thing was going to take a lot more punishment than the Eikons to put it down, and even them had been able to score some kill against Visha's brethren on the Rhine. "Keep yourself alive and try to help the locals out if you can. I'll handle this."

Before she could argue anymore, I flicked the tube's safety off, jammed the needle into my throat and pressed the injector. As the pain of transformation overwhelmed me, my thoughts turned to the last time I'd used Kosmosblut. It had left me bed-ridden for days and had permanently mutated my eyes.

What price would I pay this time ?

---

*August 26th, 1925 – ???????????*

Rhiner Neumann watched in awe as a goddess made war against a monster.

He had heard the stories of what had happened in Arene, when the Major had first used the Kosmosblut to fight off twelve Eikons at the same time. And he had seen some of the artwork the troopers who had passed by the city had brought back with them depicting the Lady of Stars.

But it was one thing to hear the stories, and then to look into the star-filled eyes of his superior, and it was another to see her transformation in person. She flew off to meet the dragon-thing, the two of them clashing in the broken skies – thankfully, he no longer freaked out at the impossible sight.

Beams of starlight erupted from the Lady of Stars' hands, slamming into the dragon-thing, which replied with a stream of purple fire which she danced around, just as nimble as when she'd trained Neumann and the other aerial mages. As the two combatants moved, Neumann realized that, despite growing to over three meters high, the Major was still vastly outsized by her enemy.

His attention was drawn away from the fight as Lieutenant Serebryakov plunged and picked up one of the female magic users before she could be crushed by a collapsing pillar, deposing her next to her kindred before rising back into the air. Looking around, Neumann saw that another ruin was about to fall on one of the running group, and barely managed to make it in time to hold the entire thing up, boosting his strength to the absolute limit of what he was capable of until they were out of the danger zone.

With a roar, he pushed the pile of stone back long enough to fly away himself, gasping for breath and wincing at the pain in his muscles. The sound of the ruin finally crashing was echoed a moment later by another thunderous sound. Neumann turned to look at it, and as his heart leapt in his throat.

The star-form of Division Y's Director was down on the ground, with the monstrous dragon looming over her like a vicious predator having brought its prey down, enjoying the final moment of its despair before landing the killing blow. The Major struggled, but couldn't seem to break free. Neumann tried to think of something, anything, he could do to help, but for all his strength and magical prowess, he knew he was as a leaf in the hurricane compared to these two titans. If the Major couldn't win, then …

Suddenly, the Major's hand plunged through the rubble. There was a flash and a keening sound from underground, and a new mana signature blazed in Neumann's senses. Then, like a fey from Albish legend pulling a magic sword out of a lake, the Lady of Stars drew a blade of shining moonlight out of the ruins. The dragon recoiled from it, the first sign of fear it had shown so far. Taking advantage of its distraction, the Major stood back up, and struck with her new weapon. The hit connected, and a fountain of foul liquid erupted from the wound, causing the monster to wail, a horrific noise that made Neumann's vision swim and his ears ring painfully.

Neumann saw in the corner of his sight that the locals had stopped running at the scream. They, too, were watching the fight in awe : Neumann even saw tears running down the cheeks of several as they watched the draconic horror bleed, their eyes wide in disbelieving wonder. How long, the aerial mage wondered, had they lived in fear of that monstrosity ? He tried and failed to imagine what that must be like, to know you weren't the top of the food chain, that there was nothing you could do to protect yourself except run and hope it went after your kindred instead. And now, possibly for the first time ever, they were seeing it be hurt.

More than that : they were seeing it afraid.

The Major strode forth in pursuit as the dragon-thing recoiled, striking again and again with her moonlight blade, each blow eliciting a new horrifying scream. It tried to fly away, but the Lady of Stars rose in pursuit and caught it before it could escape, dragging it back to the ground by severing one of its wings completely. It slammed into the ground, raising a cloud of dust that probably obscured vision from the ground, but from Neumann's elevated position, he could still see as the Major followed her enemy down and rammed her new weapon through its grotesque skull.

The dragon-thing twitched for a moment, then laid still, a pool of yet more foul liquid spreading underneath it. Neumann let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, and finally realized a familiar voice had been screaming in his radio set all that time.

*"Lieutenant Neumann ! What is going on ? Report !"*

Neumann looked around. On the ground, the locals were prostrating themselves toward the Lady of Stars. Truth be told, Neumann was feeling weak in the knees himself, but he knew what the Major would do to him if she saw him kneeling before her in the middle of a dangerous area, and that fear was enough to keep them flying straight. Meanwhile, Serebryakov was already flying back to the Major's side, ready to assist once the Kosmosblut's effects ran out.

"I think," he answered the folks on the other side of the gateway, "that the Path of Stars might just have gained new converts."

---

*"... while we have yet to fully overcome the language barrier, we know they call themselves the Nazzadi.*

*So far, the gateway component of Projekt S has remained stable, but with the panel control wrecked as a result of the Allied Kingdom's protections, we have no way of knowing how long this will continue. As a result, I have given orders to bring as many Nazzadi as possible across in order to rescue them from their dead homeworld : even without the threat of the entity I defeated thanks to the Kosmosblut, this place is hardly suited for human life. Fortunately, it appears the death of the false-dragon must have been detected by their magic users, as the tribes who didn't witness the battle in person have been seen making the trek to the site of its corpse to see it for themselves.*

*At the time of this message, we have evacuated three scores Nazzadi and settled them in Castle Schwartzstein. At Doctor Iosefka's suggestion, they are being kept in quarantine until she can confirm none of them carry alien diseases that could spread through our people, as well as give them any vaccines they might need themselves. Feeding them hasn't been an issue, as they have the same dietary requirements we do. According to Doctor Iosefka, they all suffer from malnutrition to some degree and will need time and a careful meal planning to avoid long-term negative effects (our best guess as to why there doesn't seem to be any elders among them is that, simply put, no Nazzadi has survived to reach old age in a long time).*

*We do not know how many Nazzadi still live on the other side of the gateway, though I doubt there are many of them left given the hostile conditions there. While I'm aware I acted beyond my authority when offering them asylum within the Empire (let alone bringing them inside a*

*restricted facility such as Castle Schwartzstein), I would argue that humanitarian concerns trumped legal ones in this instance, and I am willing to defend that position as soon as I have recovered enough to travel to Berun. Aside from humanitarian concerns, however, I believe there is much we can learn from the Nazzadi, and they certainly seem eager to earn their keep, to the point I have forbidden my subordinates from taking advantage of them until we have breached the language barrier and a proper legal framework to their employment has been negotiated.*

*The mages and Werwölfe sent to help the evacuation have also brought back interesting remnants of what we assume to be the ruined Nazzadi civilization. It seems that in their heyday, they used technology (possibly magical) far in advance of what we possess, although all of it is in extremely damaged condition. While our researchers are very interested to study those pieces, I must warn that this might be similar to handing over a broken down radio that has spent a century underwater to the Ancient Ildoans and expect them to reverse-engineer it, except more difficult.*

*Our attempts to study the ancient Nazzadi weapon I detected and used in my transformed state have been inconclusive so far. When the effects of the Kosmosblut ran out, it transformed into what appears at first glance to be a walking stick, topped with the D-24 I brought with me through Projekt S' gateway. This fusion with a magical device of our own making is what has led us to believe the old Nazzadi technology was magical in nature, and clearly built to last.*

*However, it seems to be bonded to my person in some way, as trying to separate it from me results in it teleporting back to my side the moment it isn't directly observed : even just blinking is enough for it to vanish. Given that my current condition makes participating in the study difficult and it doesn't seem dangerous, we have tabled that line of investigation for now. I confess that the thought of never being separated from a computation orb also has a certain appeal.*

*Samples of the false-dragon's corpse have also been brought back for study, though they appear to be rotting at an accelerated pace. I'm not sure what, if anything, we might learn from them, but our scientists are, as always, very enthusiastic to find out, and at least it will keep them from bothering the Nazzadi too much.*

*The spell formulas of the Nazzadi seem to me to be more promising, as they have managed to survive an extremely hostile environment with their assistance ..."*

Excerpt from a dictated letter from Major Tanya Degurechaff to Brigadier General Hans von Zettour, August 28th, 1925.

---

*August 28th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

Brigadier General Hans von Zettour lowered the letter and looked at the Untote who had delivered it to him, knocking on his office window in the middle of yet another late night spent going over reports. The supersoldier stood at attention, just as he had the entire time Zettour had been reading.

Degurechaff's message read like a fantastical novel, but Zettour knew better than to suspect her of lying or exaggerating (though, given she'd dictated it while recovering from using Kosmosblut, perhaps a certain degree of inaccuracy had slipped in). The Brigadier General forced himself to ignore the philosophical and theological implications of the discovery of the Nazzadi's ruined world, and focused on more immediate and practical concerns.

With the Silberschlüssel's controls damaged, it would take months if not years to build a new one. Projekt S could have won them the war outright, and secured their position for years to come. The ability to send troops anywhere they wished would have been enough to force the Allied Kingdom to surrender. The mere thought of what Zettour and Rudersdorf could have done with that capability … but it seemed the Albish hadn't been idle on the Wunderwaffen front. Their nation did have a long history of magic, after all, although Degurechaff's report seemed to indicate that they'd looted whatever they'd used to block Projekt S from Kemet, on the Southern Continent.

More importantly, the fact they'd been ready to block Projekt S confirmed what they had long suspected. Either the Allied Kingdom had a spy within Central Headquarters, or they had broken the Imperial Army's wireless encryption. Neither of these possibilities were pleasant, but both should be neatly countered by the use of the Untoten as messengers.

He also refused to believe the Albish had found a way to defend the entirety of their mainland : much more likely they had centered whatever protection they had gained on their capital. If they'd known about this 'Kemetian ward' beforehand, he would have ordered Degurechaff to target some random field in the middle of Albion, and they'd be planning how best to cripple the Allied Kingdom's industrial base with Werwolf and Untoten commandos by now.

But it seemed they had all grown too used to Division Y's repeated and unstoppable successes. They had gotten too confident, and it had cost them the use of Projekt S for the foreseeable future. At least with the Nazzadi's recruitment and Degurechaff's new weapon, it wasn't a total loss.

"The Major ordered you to deliver this to me in person ?" he asked the supersoldier as he folded the message, set it ablaze with his lighter, and watched as the ashes fell into his ashtray. Just in case, he'd dispose of it himself.

"Yes, General," replied the Untote. "She also said I should bring back any response you might want to make."

"How is she ?" he asked at last. Typically, Degurechaff hadn't elaborated on the backlash she'd suffered for using Kosmosblut again.

"Well enough to dictate this message. Doctor Iosefka was attending her when I left. We … we aren't sure what the long-term consequences will be, if there are any beyond the weapon she brought back."

It was strange, Zettour reflected, to see one of the Untoten, whose existence had struck terror in the hearts of mages across Europa, look so unsure as he discussed his commanding officer's health.

"She should have made that clear in her letter," he grimaced.

"I think she didn't want to worry you, sir."

"Do you ? Well, I suppose she might at that." He sighed. "Wait a moment, please. I'm going to prepare a message for you to take back."

Zettour began to pen a response. It had been a long time since he had personally written a letter he expected to be read by the recipient instead of being encoded and sent over the wireless, but his penmanship didn't appear to have suffered from it. In the field, an officer had to be certain his writing could be read, after all, in case radio comms were down.

In his response, he assured Degurechaff that he didn't blame her for the failure of Projekt S, that she had his permission to allow these Nazzadi folks to take refuge from their hellish homeland in the Empire, and that he wished her a prompt recovery. He would get on sending more supplies to Castle Schwartzstein as soon as he could to help with that – with their victory on the Rhine, they had a lot of military provisions in storage. While those weren't exactly the sort of thing you wanted to use to introduce someone to your country's cuisine, it would at least keep them from starving, and that stuff was precisely calculated to cover all nutritious needs.

Zettour also included in his message an order to send another Untote to his office every two nights, both to keep him informed of the situation and so that he could write back without risking interception. Then, after signing, closing and sealing the letter, he handed it to the waiting supersoldier.

"Please give her my well-wishes when you pass her this message," he said.

The Untote saluted smartly, then departed through the office's open window. Zettour watched him fly until he couldn't see him anymore, once again reminded how bloody terrifying the concept of flying, impossible to detect mages was. If only the Endlose Nacht's side-effects had been different, or they didn't need to keep the Untoten who hadn't used it in reserve in case the Eikons resurfaced. Even if the Kingdom's new trick could bar them from entering Londinium, they could have wrought havoc on the Royal Fleet alone.

Zettour closed the window and returned to his desk. He would have to talk to Rudersdorf in the morning to discuss their next move, though he had a suspicion he already knew what his old friend would propose. Opening another front, one separated from the Fatherland by the entire Inner Sea, wouldn't make the Department of Logistics happy, but if Degurechaff's theory as to how the Albish had been able to block Projekt S was true, then killing two birds with one stone might be what they needed right now.

The Brigadier General pulled out an atlas of the Southern Continent, and began to pour over maps, his mind already estimating supply requirements and possible routes, along with plots to root out the Albish spies within the Empire.

After a moment of work, he sighed and went to make some coffee. It was going to be another long night, and he wasn't getting any younger.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Why did I use the Nazzadi from CthulhuTech instead of another, more eldritch race (like the serpent people, who had the Nazzadi's role in the first draft) ? Well, there are a few reasons. The first and most important is that someone suggested them on the SB thread, and the Muse immediately screamed "THIS", so I obviously had no choice. But that's not the only reason. Another reason is related to the cosmology I've pieced together for this story, so I can't share it with you without spoilers.

Also, there is the fact that I'm almost convinced the Nazzadi as a concept were created by the makers of CthulhuTech as a deliberate mockery/inversion of the racism so prevalent in the classic Lovecraftian Mythos. They are humans whose genetics have been meddled with by alien beings for the express purpose of looking scary, but instead of being inbred, hideous and inferior, they are exotically beautiful and technologically advanced. They can interbreed with baseline humans, on account of really just being another ethnicity of Humanity, albeit one artificially created, and in CthulhuTech lore, they end up living peacefully with their parent species and fighting side-by-side in the Aeon War. If you showed that to Lovecraft, he would faint in shock (although to be fair it probably didn't take much to achieve that).

Also, the Nazzadi remind me of the Nox from Elden Ring, whose design I really like. And finally, there is a part of me that can't stop giggling at the thought of turning Grantz into an Anime Harem Protagonist.

All in all, adding the Nazzadi to AYGWM seemed funny to me, and so here they are. How did they come to exist ? Where exactly did Projekt S lead to after being repelled by Merlin's wards, and how did it end up locking on that destination ? What the hell happened to the Nazzadi civilization to leave it in ruins and its sky broken ? Where did the big monster come from ?

I'm not going to answer any of these questions yet. Congratulations, friends, you are now feeling as confused and lost as a Lovecraftian protagonist. Feel free to speculate, and I will laugh at your guesses while shamelessly cribbing anything that looks interesting to incorporate it into the story.

Don't bother wasting time trying to identify the dragon-thing Tanya fought from the Cthulhu Mythos : I made it up after going through an entire Mythos bestiary and not finding anything that I felt fit the story's needs.

Any suggestions for new side effect of Kosmosblut ? The bonded weapon is one, but I feel there should be something more personal too.

As you probably guessed, we are going to move to the Southern Continent for the next chapter, specifically to Kemet, the name I have chosen for Not!Egypt. I am still working on the details of just what force Division Y will send there, with the main question being whether to send poor Lergen along or not. What do you think ? Does it make sense for a

Colonel who ostensibly works for Central Headquarters to be sent along the General who will be in overall command of the Imperial troops on the Southern Continent ? I know making Lergen suffer is never not funny, but I do want this to at least superficially make sense. I could also send Tanya, of course, but she just injected herself with another dose of Kosmosblut : it would make sense that she would need time to recover.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*STRANGE LIGHTS WITNESSED IN THE SKIES OF LONDINIUM !*

*Last night, at around 1:00 AM, those inhabitants of Londinium who were still awake were privy to a grand and worrying spectacle. Though the skies were clear, great arcs of what seemed to be green and blue lightning were seen dancing in the heavens above the south of our fair city. Eyewitnesses report seeing strange sigils appear as well, and the sound of this bizarre cloudless storm awoke many from their slumber.*

*From start to finish, the strange phenomenon didn't last more than a minute or two, but left all who witnessed it shaken. As of right now, it doesn't appear to have caused any actual damage, and there has been no official statement as to the nature of this event.*

*With the war against the Empire continuing and rumors about their Wunderwaffen running wild, speculation that this was the result of yet another unholy magic designed by Imperial magical researchers spread promptly. Every week, new reports of Imperial submarines preying on merchant shipping reach our shores, but if these lights were indeed the result of Imperial activity, it would be the first time since the Battle of Arene that the Empire dares to deploy its superweapons within a city ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Londinium Times, August 27th, 1925.

---

*August 28th, 1925 – Londinium*

By all rights, the mood of the Round Table should have been triumphant, or at least cautiously optimistic. After all, they had just managed to score their first semi-victory in the struggle to catch up to the Empire's Wunderwaffen.

In the hours following the decrypting of the intercepted message which had warned them of the Empire's test of their new Wunderwaffe on Londinium, Merlin had worked feverishly to complete the wards on time. Small stone sculptures had been engraved with Kemetian sigils and placed at key locations across the city, forming a ritual circle expanding all over Londinium. Then, at the center of the circle, Merlin had cast the warding spell, channelling it through the relay stones so as to cover the entire capital of the Allied Kingdom. Building the circle to the specifications of the ancient Kemetian priest who had written the scroll had been expensive, and the Round Table had been forced to requisition several items from private collections in order to meet the deadline.

But they had done it : whatever foulness the Empire had intended for Londinium had been averted. For the first time since Division Y had revealed its superweapons to the world, it had been foiled, and surely that was worth a cheer or two. However, that victory hadn't come

without cost, and as they met to discuss their next course of action, the members of the Round Table were faced with one of them.

The Royal Wizard was pale, sweating, and sitting inside a comfortable chair with several blankets piled on him as he clutched a warm cup of medicinal tea. None of the other members of the Round Table could remember a time Merlin had looked so fragile, and they were bitterly reminded that their colleague was at least two decades older than the rest of them.

"Merlin," said Kay with uncharacteristic gentleness, "are you sure you are recovered enough to debrief us ? Shouldn't you be resting still ?"

"I am not dead yet," replied the old man with a weak smile. "And this room is little less comfortable than my own chambers in any case."

"Very well, but we best make this quick. What can you tell us about what happened ?"

"To begin with : your intelligence was on point, Agravain," replied the wizened old man. "I had only raised the wards for a few minutes before the Imperial attack started."

"Can you tell us anything about what the Imperial sorcerers were trying to accomplish ?" asked Mordred. "Propaganda aside, I find it difficult to believe they would actually use a Wunderwaffe on a city. That's the kind of thing that would make them a pariah state in the eyes of the international community, and they've been very careful to avoid that so far."

"I don't think I was struggling against Imperial mages at all," corrected Merlin. "It felt more like a machine. As to the intended goal, I cannot say for certain. The fact that the ward worked at all indicates that they probably tried to summon something, or perhaps even tear open a way for their troops to pass straight from their territory to the capital."

"Do you mean the Imperials could just magically walk through the sea and onto our mainland at any time ?" croaked Kay, not even bothering to attempt concealing the dismay he felt at the prospect.

"That is if my guess is correct. And even then, I felt the damage our struggle did to the Imperial machine. I don't know if they can repair it or build a new one."

"Even so, we have to consider the possibility they will try again at some point," pointed out Mordred. "They don't know anymore about our defences than we know about what they used to test them, but with you in this state, we can't possibly ask you to perform the spell again even if our sources warn us of another attack."

"Don't worry," said Merlin. "I had started teaching the spell to my apprentices when the Imperials attacked. They will be able to finish their studies on their own and should be able to replace me. Perhaps their youth will help them withstand it better than I."

"But we can hardly ask them to keep up the spell at all times in case of an attack … can we ?" asked Kay.

"Maybe we can," mused Merlin. "By itself, the warding spell isn't dangerous : it requires focus, yes, but no more so than any number of spells I have cast in my life. It was the clash with Division Y's attempt at reaching Londinium that drained me so. If we used some kind of rotation, with proper rest periods … But I would need more mages to ensure the capital is covered at all times."

"You will have them," promised Kay. "Even if I have to pull people from the Aerial Corps keeping watch over the Dodobird Strait. There isn't much point guarding the shore if the enemy can just teleport right in our midst."

Frankly, if the Imperials really had that kind of ability at their disposal, then the Allied Kingdom might as well throw in the towel and sue for peace terms as soon as possible. Hopefully Merlin had crippled that particular Wunderwaffe beyond recovery, or it had some kind of limitation. Even just the ability of delivering a handful of agents behind enemy lines was nightmarish enough, but it might be possible to handle it.

"I've also brought in more scholars to help translate the other Kemetian scrolls in the Royal Wizard's archive, as well as look for signs of other …" Merlin coughed, before continuing : "other instances of Elder Magic across the ages. Wards are useful, but you can't win a war with just a shield."

"If you think that's for the best, then it is your prerogative. We could certainly use new tools against the Wunderwaffen."

"There is something else," said Merlin. "During the struggle, I also sensed something other than the Imperial machine. Far to the south-east of Albion, in the land where that spell came from, lies a … power source of some kind, which the spell drew upon."

"We need to find it, then, if only to keep the Imperials from getting it first," frowned Mordred. "But Kemet is a big place. There's a reason people are constantly finding new ancient treasures, and it isn't just because of the booming forgery market."

"I recorded the magical signature of whatever it was in my staff," offered Merlin. "I believe I can create some kind of compass pointing to it for one of my apprentices to use in order to find it."

"Then do so … as soon as you can without hurting your health further, that is," Agravain added hastily. "Better yet, why don't you see if your apprentices can't do it themselves ? Meanwhile, I will set up an expedition to find out what it is you sensed and whether it can be used in the war effort."

"I will," promised Merlin, before being overcome by a sudden fit of coughing. As he drank deep of his cup, the rest of the Round Table moved on to other, less immediately important but no less vital matters.

Running a war, after all, was a lot of work.

---

*September 25th, 1925 – Kemetian Capital Kheriaha*

Professor Henry Carnahan, of His Majesty Royal College's Department of Archaeology, smiled and nodded his thanks to the local merchant as the two of them finished their transaction. The amount of currency he had just handed over was several times the actual worth of the equipment for desert travel he had purchased, but then he had also paid for something far more valuable : information.

He made his way through the bustling streets of Kheriaha and back to the safehouse where his associate was waiting with the rest of their group. The young lady, who looked like she had just stepped out of one of Londinium's most exclusive tea parties, greeted his arrival with a polite nod. She cut quite the striking figure in her travel clothes, and Carnahan had grown to appreciate her wit during the trip from Londinium – her strong magical potential had led her to develop a much more open attitude than most Albish women were permitted to express in public.

A lesser man might have been tempted to try his luck at getting to know her better, so to speak, but Carnahan had been happily married for five years, loved his two sons more than life itself, and didn't intend to do anything so monumentally stupid.

"It's confirmed, Miss Niniane," he told her after putting down his purchases. "On the same night as what happened in Londinium, the folks here saw strange lights in the desert to the west. It was hard to tell how far, but it shouldn't take us more than a few days to reach the area, two weeks at the utmost. After that, your compass should get us where we need to go, assuming it works as you said it does."

"I assure you that it will." She pulled out the device in question and snapped it open : the needle was pointing west instead of north, just like it had since they had arrived in Kheriaha after their boat had docked at the port. The needle was a bit wobbly, however, moving one way or another as if someone was playing with magnets close to it. She noticed him looking at the motion and continued : "Don't worry : the closer we get to our destination, the clearer the direction will become. It's a standard feature of tracking spells. When can you have everything ready for our departure ?"

While Carnahan was under no illusion as to Niniane's position above him in their little expedition's hierarchy (being an apprentice to the Royal Wizard came with its perks, as did carrying the firepower of an artillery battery on your person), he counted his blessings that she was willing to defer to his greater expertise when it came to the more practical aspects of their mission.

"I should have everything ready in time for a departure tomorrow at dawn," he told her confidently. This wasn't his first time mounting such an expedition, and while the war had everyone a bit more nervous than usual, the city had yet to actually suffer for it. "I have to ask : do you know how to ride ?"

"I am familiar with it, yes," she answered.

"Good. Camels aren't quite the same thing as horses, but it's still better than walking."

Renting camels for the two of them plus their four bodyguards and assistants would set him back a pretty penny, but then he was doing his duty to King and Country, and the Royal

Wizard's office had promised to cover the costs. Carnahan was as patriotic as the next John Bull, and he could freely admit that being sent on that kind of secret, extremely important mission (or so he'd inferred from the urgency of his summons and the speed at which the whole business had been set up despite the war), was more than a little exciting. In the years he'd spent trotting the globe, archaeology had been a quiet and sedate affair, apart from the few times he had gotten involved with various groups objecting to his claiming ancient relics for the Albish Museum and had needed to run for his life.

He was hoping that this time would end up being on the quieter side.

---

*September 30th, 1925 – Francois Colonial Port of Galberj*

General Romel watched with satisfaction as his troops disembarked onto the docks of the Francois colonial port.

The journey had been nerve-racking, with every day at sea spent watching the horizon for the Royal Fleet. Romel had been briefed personally by General Zettour about the near-certainty that the Allied Kingdom had cracked their wireless codes, meaning that the Kingdom would almost definitely know his forces were on the move. And if they had tried to intercept them on the sea, well, the transport fleet had been accompanied by a sizeable escort, of course (nearly every ship that had been patrolling the Inner Sea at the start of hostilities had been pulled together for this operation), but Romel still wouldn't have wanted to bet his life on their ability to keep the Royal Navy at bay.

Fortunately, their counter-intelligence efforts had borne fruit. The cover story, that the Southern Expedition was being dispatched to bring the Francois colonies in line with the Pariseean government after the Francois President had asked for the Empire's assistance, had been bought by the Allied Kingdom. With the looming threat of an Imperial landing on their mainland, the Albish hadn't been willing to spread out their naval assets to hunt his convoy down. They had sailed south from the Imperial Navy base in Fiume until they had passed the Ildoan peninsula to their west, and crossed the Inner Sea without any more trouble than a few cases of sea sickness, before finally landing in Galberj.

The local garrison wasn't exactly happy to see them, of course, even with the Francois President doing his diplomatic best to smooth things over before their arrival. That was fair enough : Romel and his men were part of the army that had crushed theirs and taken their capital, which wasn't something you could expect anyone to enjoy. The General had made sure his men knew to be on their best behavior at all times and not to start anything. Whether that would be enough remained to be seen, but they shouldn't be staying here long enough for it to matter.

Planes were being unloaded from the ships to be transported to the Galberj air base, which under the terms of the Francois surrender the Imperial Army was entitled to use. Tanks rolled out on reinforced gangplanks, along with the rest of the expedition's vehicles. All seemed to be proceeding apace, meaning they ought to be fully disembarked and ready to depart in a few hours at best – and Romel expected nothing less than the best from the troops under his command. Getting two divisions' worth of troops and material offloaded in so short a time

was only possible thanks to Galberj's facilities, another reason why he was glad he didn't have to come onto the Southern Continent hot.

His gaze fell upon a boat slightly apart from the rest, having been chosen to carry the more unconventional assets that had been assigned to this little jaunt. The troops that were disembarking were unlike any Romel had ever commanded, and he couldn't help but feel a shiver of mixed apprehension and excitement at the thought of leading them in battle.

Men carrying strange guns escorted people in hooded robes and lab coats, and five coffin-shaped boxes were being very carefully carried outside and toward the trucks waiting for them. Soldiers who didn't carry any weapon other than a few knives and pistol moved with a predatory grace that screamed 'dangerous' to anyone with a lick of sense, looking around as if expecting an ambush at all times.

And a bespectacled man in a Colonel's uniform led the disembarkment of it all, agitatedly speaking with a tall Captain who bore the insignia of the Empire's Aerial Mages Corps. Romel checked one last time his subordinates had everything in hand then, with a smile, walked over him.

"Well, here we are, Colonel !" he called out. "Aren't you happy to be off these fine ships ?"

"General Romel." Colonel Eric von Lergen sighed. "Please remember the decorum of your position. But, yes. I confess I'm glad to have solid ground under my feet again."

Lergen had been one of the worst afflicted by sea sickness, to the point it had been his second-in-command who had reported that all was well to Romel on the way across the Inner Sea.

"The Southern sun will do you good, Colonel !" Romel exclaimed, slapping the man on the back. "You look far too pale. Too much time spent behind a desk or under the smoke of the Rhine !"

"It certainly is sunnier here," Lergen admitted.

"Shame we aren't here as tourist, isn't it ? Damn those Albish for making us come all the way here just to shoot at each other." Romel smiled, knowing the look this gave him. "We'll have to make them pay for that lack of politeness, I reckon. Come to think of it, you've your own score to settle with them, don't you ?"

Lergen pushed his glasses back up his nose. "If you're referring to the attack on the Rhine, General, I feel those fools already paid the price for that in full. But if you're talking about the Kingdom's declaration of war itself, then … yes. I suppose I do."

Romel laughed.

"I knew there was a reason I liked you, Lergen ! Well, don't worry. By the time we're done here, the John Bulls will regret ever messing with the Empire !"

*"URGENT STOP*

*COL LERGEN SIGHTED AT GALBERJ STOP*

*IMP EXP GOING EAST NOT WEST STOP*

*DIV Y PRESENCE ON STH CONT CONFIRMED STOP"*

Encoded telegram sent by Albish agent, codename 'Mister John', September 30th, 1925.

---

*October 3rd, 1925 – Outskirts of Al-Alamein*

Despite the heat of the descending sun, Captain Alfred of the Albish Aerial Mage Forces had to admit that in any other circumstances, he would have enjoyed flying over the Bardad Desert. There was a serene beauty to the sight of the land stretching beneath him, and flying under his own power had never quite lost the sense of wonder it had when he'd first managed it during his training. Unfortunately, he couldn't just relax (well, as much as you could relax while also maintaining the spells that kept you from becoming a bloody stain on the ground below) and enjoy the view : he had a job to do, and inattention could kill him just as easily as gravity, and with far less warning.

The Royal Army troops in Kemet had been told that the Imperial contingent was being sent to bring the Francois colonies into line with the central government, which had surrendered to the Empire. Given that everyone knew the Kingdom was trying to get the Republican colonies to join in the fight against the Empire (a task which, in Alfred's opinion, had probably become a lot harder after the attack on Brest), that had made sense.

Alfred had even heard some of the other officers joke that the Empire had no idea what it was doing, and that the proud Francois colonial commanders would only bristle more at the intrusion, hence why the Allied Kingdom had let the Imperial transport fleet arrive on the continent in the first place. After all, you should never stop your opponent when he is making a mistake.

Alfred wasn't so sure about that. The Empire had proven itself to be led by great strategists as well as tacticians : the terms it had offered to the Entente and Republic after their defeat proved it.

Of course, they had still strengthened their position in the east of Kemet, just in case. New recruits were beginning to arrive from the Eastern colonies as the mobilization there progressed, and most of them had to pass through the Suan Canal. The coastal fortress of Arigzandria was being used as a mustering point, meaning they had plenty of troops to call upon in the defense of His Majesty's interests. The Albish Majesty, that was, not the puppet king who sat on the Kemetian throne.

The engineer corps had been busy, and the small railway station had been converted into a veritable fortress, with more men coming in as fast as the trains and trucks could carry them. By now, they had four divisions stationed at Al-Alamein : one dispatched from the mainland and three freshly arrived from the colonies, all of them ready to meet the foe.

Which, by the look of it, would happen very soon.

"General Corbyn," Alfred called over his radio set. "I have eyes on the Imperial vanguard. At the speed they are moving, they will reach our positions before sunset."

*"Already ? I was hoping the savages would delay them a bit longer."*

Alfred swallowed the reply he wanted to make at his superior's name for their local allies. He was spared from having to say anything when another voice cut in :

*"Actually, sir, they stopped their hit-and-run attacks on the Imperial forces four days ago."*

The new voice belonged to a man who was simply known as Mister John. He had shown up at Al-Alamein two days ago, having just travelled from Galberj ahead of the Imperial Army. One of the many spooks scattered across the Southern Continent as part of the Great Game the Europan powers played against each other in the region, he had also been the one who had negotiated with the desert tribes of the Francois territories to harass the enemy as they advanced.

Personally, Alfred thought that handing weapons to the notoriously independent-minded tribesmen probably wasn't going to endear the Kingdom to the Republic. But no one had asked his opinion on the subject, so all he could do was keep quiet and carry on.

*"What ?! What do they think we gave them these guns for ?! And why wasn't I informed earlier ?"*

*"We didn't know about it. They only told me when I went to meet them this morning. Apparently, one night, a strange, foul-smelling mist appeared all around their camp without warning. Then an Imperial officer walked in, his uniform completely devoid of sand, introduced himself as Captain von Uger, and politely told them that they could either stop their raids and tell the other tribes to do the same, or next time he and his friends visited they would be much less polite. Since our deal with them didn't include fighting desert demons, the chieftain decided to accept the offer. He did tell me we were welcome to take the guns back if we wanted, though."*

"General," said Alfred, "this is evidence the Imperials brought their Wunderwaffen with them. I recommend we reconsider the deployment of our troops."

What he really wanted to say was 'We need to withdraw back to Arigzandria and pray God for a miracle', but you just couldn't say that to your commanding officer.

*"We outnumber them two to one, and we've the advantage of a defensive position. These monsters might have been enough to break the will of the Francois on the Rhine, but they were supported by the entire might of the Imperial Army. Here, all they have are a couple divisions led by some blue-horn I have never heard of."*

*"Our intelligence does suggest that Colonel Lergen is with them,"* Mister John pointed out. *"And he was the one who orchestrated Division Y's participation in the Francois debacle.*

*The good Captain might have a point, although I'm afraid it's much too late for retreat by now."*

*"Enough defeatism ! This is His Majesty's land,"* said Corbyn pompously, completely disregarding the fact that Kemet had been technically given its own sovereignty years ago and was ruled by its own monarch. *"We will not let the Imperial dogs just waltz through it unpunished !"*

"Yes, sir," Alfred answered mechanically, trying to ignore the cold sensation in his stomach.

He was not looking forward to this, not one bit. But the General had given his orders, and Mister John had a point too : trying to escape Al-Alamein now would only result in the Imperials' vanguard catching them from behind without the benefit of fortifications to cover them.

---

*October 4th, 1925 – Castle Schwartzstein*

Sitting at my desk within my office, holding Visha's cup of morning coffee in one hand and my walking stick in the other, I listened to the report of Captain Johann-Mattäus Weiss' magically projected image.

*"All in all, the battle went as well as it possibly could have. At sunset, General Romel deployed the Untoten ahead of our main force to pick up the enemy mages, then we sent the Spectres to walk through the walls of their bunkers and pillboxes and take out the heavy guns. Their planes were a bit more of an issue, but with Galberj's airbase to launch ours from, we achieved air superiority early in the fight."*

*"After that, the Untoten were withdrawn after dealing with the mages to avoid draining our blood reserves. The aerial mages and myself bombarded the defenders from above while the Specters went after the commanders and the rest of the Werwölfe spearheaded the infantry's advance."*

"How did our new friends perform ?"

*"Everyone followed their training without problem. The Mirages' illusion abilities more than made up for their slower regeneration compared to the Phantoms. They couldn't heal as fast, but they didn't get hit as much. With the Specters having disabled the enemy heavy guns, it was a slaughter. I don't think the Kingdom commander had told his troops what to expect, so the sight of the 'Devils of the Rhine' was quite the psychological shock."*

I could imagine that all too easily. The bulk of the Albish troops the Southern Expedition had faced were freshly-raised colonials, meaning their first real taste of combat would've been the sight of a bunch of seemingly invulnerable monsters charging at them, right after their mages had been torn from the skies and their heaviest guns had been taken out. And regardless of what their Europan officers might think, I doubted they had been too happy about being sent to fight on another continent in the first place.

As the Battle of the Rhine had shown, conventional armies without supersoldiers of their own couldn't hope to stand up to Projekte U and W. I was surprised the Albish had even tried, but maybe their commander hadn't known about Division Y's involvement, in which case the decision to fortify Al-Alamein would have made much more sense. Or maybe he was just an idiot who irrationally believed the Allied Kingdom's army to be inherently superior to that of the Republic.

*"I will have a more detailed report on the battle when I return, but in the end we crippled the Kingdom troops' heavy fire, took a lot of them prisoner, including one General Robert Corbyn, and forced the rest to flee back to Arigzandria. We are processing them now : the General is thinking on converting the base into a prison camp while we regroup and prepare to continue onto our objective."*

"My congratulations to General Romel," I said. "Having the Wunderwaffen is one thing; making good tactical use of them is another."

*"Yes, ma'am. The Untoten also managed to take some enemy mages prisoner : I think they wanted to prove they could be relied on not to give in to their impulses after what happened on the Rhine."*

"Really ?" I sighed. "I mean, I'm glad they did, don't get me wrong, but they were under the influence of the Endlose Nacht back then. A drug that we created and told them to take. They didn't have to prove anything. Still, give them my congratulations."

The final battle of the Rhine had been the first time the Untoten had succumbed to their bloodthirst and feasted upon living foes. The five we had sent to the Southern Continent had completely recovered from the side-effects of the Eikon blood (they wouldn't have been cleared for deployment otherwise), even if their permanent weakness to running water meant they had to spend the trip in torpor within their coffins.

"And how is Captain Uger adapting to his new command ?"

When then-Colonel Uger had joined the ranks of Projekt W, his rank had been something of a conundrum. He had earned it, no question about that, and being mortally wounded in battle was the sort of thing that got you promoted on paper, not demoted. But I, the overall commander of Division Y, was only a Major. So Uger had been shuffled back to Captain, with his file marking it as due to him recovering from his injuries and not being able to take on his old responsibilities. He had taken it remarkably well, joking that he would gladly have spent the rest of his military career as a private scrubbing pots and digging latrines if it meant he could hold his daughter again.

Really, granting miraculous healing to employees made managing them so much easier. Then again, Division Y didn't exactly follow the standards of the Imperial Army when it came to rank, not unlike the Aerial Mage Corps. I was still only a Major, for instance, despite my accomplishments and the fact that I effectively commanded an entire new branch of the military. From what General Zettour had implied, Central Headquarters had decided to hold off on promoting me further so long as it didn't impede my ability to command so as to maintain operational secrecy : there had already been too many signs that the enemy knew more than we were comfortable with about Division Y's operations.

The same logic applied to medals, though not to the ones I had asked for the Untoten who had died against the Eikons. For propaganda reasons, decorations were all made public within the Empire, meaning the Kingdom's spies could potentially use them to, say, track down Captain Uger's family and use them as hostages to force his compliance.

I was fine with it : the lower my profile, the more likely it was I would manage to fade into the background and avoid being put on trial for war crimes after the war was over. Though a pay increase would've been nice, with all the overtime I was putting in.

*"He's doing well. Having him as scout was very useful in finding the tribesmen that were harassing us."*

"Good. What about the occultists ? Any problem with them ?"

*"Nothing major,"* he told me in a tone of voice that, even through the spell's distortion, managed to convey that I didn't want to ask how a bunch of third-son nobles and academics were adapting to life in the desert. For all its many dangers, Castle Schwartzstein was almost sinfully comfortable to live in, something I justified as our personnel deserving the best living conditions given the importance of their work.

"Very well. Good work, Captain. Continue following General Romel and Colonel Lergen's lead until you reach the Canal."

After that, the nominal operational goals of the Southern Expedition would be fulfilled, and it would be time for him and the rest of Division Y to go after their own objectives. I wasn't sure if General Romel had been briefed on those, though I hoped Colonel Lergen had been.

*"Yes ma'am,"* he replied with a crisp salute, then cut off the spell.

I stretched my limbs and thought back on all that he had told me. The Southern Expedition was in good hands, but then I'd expected as much. Colonel Lergen had shown he could lead the supersoldiers of Division Y before, and if General Romel was anything like the one I vaguely remembered from the history books of my previous world, there were few strategists more suited to this particular theatre of war.

Of course, when General Zettour had presented his plan to me through Neumann (who I had sent to Berun with orders to essentially serve as a communication relay after pounding into his skull what I would do to him if any of the state secrets he would have to repeat through the D-24's communication spell leaked), I had offered to join the Southern Expedition myself. Much as I very much didn't want to go fight in a desert war, not offering would have made me look bad. Fortunately, General Zettour had refused, saying that he had another idea.

While he had claimed to have his own reasons to want to send Colonel Lergen, I was also pretty sure he didn't want to send me out so soon after my second use of Kosmosblut. The thought made me look down at my arm before I could stop myself.

My right forearm was covered in a black glove that concealed the fact that my skin up to my elbow had become the same kind of star-filled night sky that my entire body became when I used the Kosmosblut, with my normal skin appearing to crack and flake off at the junction.

The fabric around my hand had to be especially thick to obscure the galaxy-shaped light shining from my palm where I had first touched the Nazzadi arcane device that had allowed me to kill the dragon-thing. My sense of touch with that limb had also gone strange, though the covering helped and I could still handle day-to-day activity without issue.

As prices for using the Kosmosblut went, it could have been much worse, even if the knowledge I was looking more and more like a chuunibyou was painful to bear. Far better my body pay the cost than my mind, however. Perhaps my cavalier attitude was due to my reincarnation and me still regarding my old body as my 'true' one, it wasn't as if I could talk with a professional psychologist about it.

More worrying was the speed with which I had decided to resort to the Kosmosblut. My reasoning for doing so still held up even with the benefits of hindsight, but I was still worried that, for all that I considered myself a rational individual, the temptation of that much power might have warped my judgment. I had thought the sheer agony of transformation, which made the mercifully brief last moments of my previous life pale in comparison, would have been enough to keep me from developing a dependency to the serum, but I had to consider the possibility. I hadn't even tried to fight the dragon-thing without it, instead turning to its use the moment I'd seen Neumann's attack spells failing to do any damage.

Again, that had been the correct tactical decision. It was just the thought process by which I had reached it that was suspect.

I rested my walking stick against the side of my desk. At the moment, it looked like a silver stick topped with a computation orb : a bit unusual to be sure, but nothing spectacular. However, since Doctor Iosefka had cleared me for strenuous activity, I had taken it for a spin in the air above Castle Schwartzstein.

The changes had been undeniable, both in casting speed and amount of mana the orb could process at the same time. I could fly faster and make tighter turns, and I was pretty sure that if I had really pushed myself I could have reached the lower edges of space, so far above even the best aircraft of the era it wasn't even funny. The D-24, for all its many advantages, wasn't a true Mythos-based computation orb, merely a step toward that goal. My walking stick, on the other hand, very much was what we'd theorized the final product of that avenue of research might be.

The Nazzadi had no idea what the stick had been before I fused it with my D-24. They seemed to be making up all kind of wild stories about it and my fight against the dragon-thing, which they had called Akhar-Zegog, the Devourer of Hope (or possibly time or the future, we were still working on the lexicon). A grandiose name, yes, but then that creature had plagued them since the collapse of their civilization, as far as we could tell.

Interrogating the Nazzadi about their past had revealed something that continued to puzzle our researchers. Judging by the tales of those we had rescued, some living Nazzadi had had grandparents who remembered the collapse of their civilization, having passed on the fantastical tales of their lost glory to their children, and them to their own children. But in other tribes, so many generations had passed that the very notion of a pre-fall Nazzadi civilization was completely unknown. There were several possible explanations, but I felt the more likely one was related to how timekeeping devices had all, without fail, failed once

brought across the gateway. Whatever had happened that had killed Nazza-Duhni and ended the Nazzadi civilization, it had damaged the passage of time itself on that benighted world.

Of course, the only reason I could imagine that possibility was because of the science-fiction I had read in my previous life. To the rest of Division Y, who hadn't been taught Einstein's theory of relativity, time was a constant that always passed at the same rate, except in fairy tales. As a whole, though, they were far more interested in the Nazzadi themselves, as well as the artefacts brought back from their world, than in what most of them dismissed as the result of stories being passed down in certain tribes and being forgotten in others.

In total, we had rescued two hundred and thirty-six Nazzadi from Nazza-Duhni (which was what they had called their homeland, meaning 'Home of the People'). They were, as far as we could tell, the last survivors on their entire people, living in the one area of the whole dead planet that could still somewhat sustain life, despite the constant threat of Akhar-Zegog. Further exploration by the Untoten and aerial mages of Division Y had revealed that the rest of the planet was covered in constant, violent dust storms filled with eldritch lightning, and those had been getting closer and closer every day following our arrival. Whether Akhar-Zegog had held the storms at bay to preserve its food source, or the weapon I had used to kill it had, or it was a completely unrelated coincidence (unlikely, but stranger things had happened), it didn't really matter.

Even the last habitable region of Nazza-Duhni had been a death sentence to the Nazzadi. They had managed to feed themselves using magic to purify water and help cultivate gross, disgusting mushrooms which complemented their diet of insects, but there hadn't been enough food, and less and less as time passed. The only question was whether Akhar-Zegog or starvation would have killed them off first if we hadn't arrived.

Of the Nazzadi we had rescued, a disproportionate high number were mages. Rather than being innately more gifted, I suspected this was the result of brutal survival selection pressure : the Nazzadi able to use magic had been better suited to survive on their dead world than those who weren't. They were also very enthusiastic about learning how to fly as they had seen Neumann, Visha and I do, but their lack of mathematical education meant it would still be some time before the first Nazzadi took to the skies as an Imperial aerial mage.

The newcomers were also understandably fascinated by the sky. It was frequent for them to spend hours of their free time on the walls of the castle just looking up, and we had needed to treat several cases of eye damage after staring at the sun for too long before they had learned their lesson. During the night, you could even hear them sing as they stargazed; and while their songs were beautiful, they were also haunting and mournful, as the only time the Nazzadi had been able to sing without fearing to draw Akhar-Zegog's attention was when it had just devoured another of their kinsmen. Several members of Division Y were determined to teach the Nazzadi happier songs.

Once our efforts to establish dialogue with the Nazzadi were well underway, I had toyed with the idea of offering them jobs as code talkers for the Empire. With our wireless communications compromised, adding another layer of encoding by having the Nazzadi translate messages into their native language would have been a powerful security measure. The issue was, the Nazzadi language had suffered badly from the apocalypse. Only a fraction

of their vocabulary had survived across all tribes, which meant we would need to develop an entire set of code words : not exactly the best for flexibility. Also, it would still be some time before I felt confident sending the Nazzadi beyond the immediate surroundings of Castle Schwartzstein. The trips to the forest Doctor Iosefka had requested for the children were already stressing me out enough, even if I understood the physical and mental health benefits.

One day, maybe, once we had more time to work with the Nazzadi with a shorter lineage to their people's past and they were less susceptible of going googly-eyed at the sight of a functioning civilization.

We had evacuated the last Nazzadi a few hours before Projekt S had finally shut down and the gateway had collapsed. The technicians had given us enough warning that nobody had been stuck on the other side. Even if we restored the Silberschlüssel, the coordinates of Nazza-Duhni were lost : we would never go back there again. After all, it was already a miracle we'd gotten there at all in the first place, and I was very suspicious of that kind of things. I couldn't think of why Being X would want us to rescue the Nazzadi – well, they had been very effusive in their gratitude to us, so maybe he wanted them to pray in thanks for their deliverance, but that seemed unlikely.

I still wasn't sure what his game was in all this. The Eikons were clearly his doing, but they'd had a chance to kill me back in Arene and hadn't taken it, instead wasting time preaching at me. Did the bastard want me to break and beg for his mercy ? Or was he playing a longer game, wanting me to become a figure of worship myself, something I was bitterly aware had already started in Arene and among the Nazzadi, despite my best efforts to quash that sort of thing ?

My best theory was that he was using me and Division Y as the Great Evil against which his chosen dupes could struggle in a heroic fight for the fate of the world, all in order to drum up faith and prayers. It was part of the reason why I was so determined to keep the Empire from using the Wunderwaffen for committing war crimes that would set the entire world against us, and had risked telling General Rudersdorf that generous peace terms for the Entente were in everyone's best interests. After all, the Empire's strategic goals in the Great War were to secure its borders from the threat of the hostile countries surrounding us : given that outright conquest was a pie in the sky, making these countries indebted to us through our generosity was the only realistic way this could be achieved.

To be fair to the Empire's diplomats, they had planned for relatively generous peace terms all along, not wanting to have to fight the same war again in a few decades. And of course, that lofty goal of setting up the Empire as a continental hegemon through diplomatic and economical ties would only be achieved if we won the Great War and didn't destroy Europa or the world in the process.

I wasn't afraid to admit that the sight of Nazza-Duhni's desolation had shaken me. As cautionary tales on the dangers of meddling with the Mythos went, gazing upon the ruin of an entire world spreading under a broken sky was pretty difficult to top. Unfortunately, it seemed the Allied Kingdom was looking for the means to counter the Wunderwaffen, and while they probably weren't going to build their own Denkmaschine (although they had been

the ones to build a massive proto-computer to help their war effort in my old world), they had clearly found something.

Strangely, I had found myself hoping whatever the Albish had found in Kemet that had countered Projekt S came from Being X, just like the Eikons. On the one hand, the thought of that bastard being behind the old pantheon that had once been worshipped there sickened me, but on the other, I would much rather avoid the John Bulls messing around with the Mythos. The Eikons had proven that Being X's gifts were as dangerous to their wielder as to their enemies, but so far they didn't appear to be capable of ending life on the planet as we knew it.

The thought of signing a de-escalation treaty with Being X briefly flickered in my mind. The worst part of it was, if I had a way of contacting him, I might genuinely have considered it. Him toying with this world's people for the purposes of messing with me and harvesting their faith was bad, but everyone dying horribly in a Mythos apocalypse would be far worse. However, since I hadn't heard from him since he'd reincarnated me, that option was off the table and it was up to me to impress upon Imperial High Command how important this was.

Which also involved providing other, less destructive options to my superiors so that the Empire didn't end up cornered to the point where they began to consider unleashing the full arsenal of horrors locked in the castle's vaults. If I never saw the Kinder again, it would be too soon. Our last round of recruitment for Projekt W had come and gone with about the same survival rate as the last : this time, fifty-one candidates had survived.

By the time the last ritual came and went, we had gotten fourteen Phantoms, twenty-seven Mirages, two Echoes, two Spectres, three Whispers and four representatives of a new breed that we were calling 'Shadows'.

The Shadows were red, brown and spiky, with double-jointed, powerful legs that let them jump incredible distances. Elya had been very enthusiastic about them, all but demanding they be assigned to her efforts to build a counter-espionage group within Division Y. It was easy to see why : each Shadow had the ability to turn not just invisible, but also completely silent as well as undetectable through thermal detection spells, at will. They also had sharp thorns on their bulky arms, and the beard-like needles growing out of their chin could be fired and were coated in a paralytic poison. And then, of course, there was their special ability (every sub-type seemed to have one, though we hadn't discovered the Echo's yet) to teleport up to a hundred meters next to a target they could see in a flurry of attacks. They were much less tough than the Phantom sub-type, and their regeneration was also much slower. We had classified them as a 'Stealth Combat Werwolf' type : they looked pretty much designed for espionage, kidnapping and assassination, and I had approved Elya's request for her to start training them in spycraft as soon as they had passed basic training.

As General Romel and Colonel Lergen had demonstrated on the Southern Continent, more Werwölfe opened new tactical possibilities, but what we needed was another strategic tool. Projekt S would have been perfect, but it would take months to build a new one, and that was if we could find all the components required, some of which were incredibly rare and valuable.

I had an idea, several in fact. But a lot would depend on what we, and the Kingdom, found in the sands of Kemet in the near future.

*October 4th, 1925 – Bardad Desert*

The journey had been long, but at last, they were in sight of their destination – and what a sight it was. Carnahan could feel his blood boil with excitement (as well as the heat of the desert sun) as he took in the structure emerging from the sands at the foot of the dune his camel was currently atop of.

A vast square expanse of flat stone stretched between the dunes, with a row of pillars delimitating it on each side and a handful of buildings built atop it. Even from this distance, Carnahan could see that each pillar was covered in engravings that had miraculously survived the passage of time.

"How the hell did nobody find this place before ?" he asked out loud, bewildered.

He hadn't expected an answer, but Niniane gave him one anyway :

"I can feel the remnants of a concealment and protection spell woven around it. I think it was damaged when my master fought back the Empire's attack on Londinium."

"Leading to the strange lights the locals saw in the process," Carnahan finished. "Makes sense to me." Then he frowned as something else occurred to him. "That means this whole place is exposed to the elements now. We have to make sure to record as much as we can …"

"While I understand your professional enthusiasm, Mister Carnahan," said Niniane with a wry smile, "remember that our main priority is finding if there is anything that can be used in our struggle against the Empire's superweapons."

"I know, I know. It's just …" he sighed. "This is an incredible academic discovery, Miss. I just wish we had found it in better times."

An intact structure from Ancient Kemet, with who knew what still inside, completely untouched by time or greed ? It would have been the talk of the entire archaeological community if not the country, and would've made his career. Now, he somehow doubted the government would let him publish whatever findings he made during this journey.

"As do I, Mister Carnahan," said Niniane wistfully. "As do I. But we have a duty to King and Country, and we'll do it without complaint."

Chapter End Notes

AN : As far as I know, Lergen getting seasick isn't canon. I just thought it was funny.

Oh, and I'm sure nothing bad will happen to Mister Carnahan and Miss Niniane. I don't know why you would possibly think otherwise.

This chapter has a lot of alternative names for countries and cities that exist IRL. Some of them were collected from various canon sources, others I made up. Here is a list of the names I found in the LN and the manga (although the latter is a fan translation, so take that list with a grain of salt) :

Tripoli : Politoli.
Tunis : Turus.
Alexandria : Arigzandria.
Benghazi : Galberj.
El-Alamein : Al-Alamein.
El-Kantaoui : Amphidable.
Algeria : Malgeria.
Sahara Desert : Barbad Desert.
Mediterranean Sea : Inner Sea.

Now, onto the names I made up. The name of Not!Egypt is Kemet, the Black Land, so called after the fertile areas around the Nile. As mentioned by one reader (owrtho) on SB, the fact that the area is known by its own name rather than one placed upon it by the Greeks implies they were somewhat more powerful/influential on the international scene (in this story, hinting at the powerful magics they once possessed), even though that wasn't enough to keep them from being subjugated by the Allied Kingdom. The name of Kheriaha for Cairo as capital of Kemet was found by me wandering on the wikipedia page and finding it as a name for the Babylon Fortress, located in IRL Cairo. I chose it because it sounded cool. The Suan Canal is an alternative name for Suez suggested by MyGameMyWay2Play on SpaceBattles. Fiume is the city of Rijeka, a port city in IRL Croatia. After checking the maps in the LN, I found out that the Empire has a coastline to the Inner Sea where Crotia is IRL, which forced me to rewrite part of Romel's POV as I redesigned the entire first phase of the Southern Expedition as a result.

Once again, this chapter ended up written much faster than I thought it would, even if far more of that time was spent researching geography and history than I had planned. I hope you enjoyed it and are looking forward to what comes next : reviews, comments and suggestions are a big part of what keeps up this story's frenetic writing pace. Right now, I am looking for suggestions for Mythos Projekte Tanya could use to solve the issue of the Royal Navy (since she mentions it in her POV, I don't think it's a spoiler). Of course, the new Echoes she got from the gacha (which once again was completely randomized, with the same rules as last time) will have to be involved somehow, but I'm looking for more.

By the way, this story has a TV Tropes page now. Please check it out and fill it up !

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"My Lord,*

*Our expedition to Kemet has already proven a considerable success. We have found the location you detected, and it is everything we hoped for and more. Located within the Bardad Desert, several days' travel to the west of Kheriaha, it consists of a score of buildings in the style of Ancient Kemet, perfectly safeguarded from the elements by a spell of preservation (although sand has begun to pile in now that the spell has been broken).*

*Most buildings appear to have served as barracks and warehouses, while the pillars surrounding it are covered in ancient script. Professor Carnahan has attempted a rough translation of the hieroglyphs using the sources available to us. According to him, they recount a great battle waged by the ancient priests of Kemet against a terrible foe served by legions of unnatural creatures, fought in a place only referred to as the 'Nameless City', or 'City of the Nameless One' (Professor Carnahan isn't certain, as several of the hieroglyphs involved are unlike any he's ever encountered before). While the text makes it clear the Pharaoh of the time was involved in the war, his (or her) name isn't mentioned, making precise dating all but impossible.*

*It is the building at the center of the complex, however, which most drew our interest. As the largest of the structures, it has been identified as a cross between a temple and a stronghold, although one Professor Carnahan assures me seems to have been built not to keep intruders out but to guard against something inside, judging by the defensive positions and arrow-slits located within its walls. Statues and images of the old Kemetian gods are also present, with the sun-god who also served as head of the pantheon being the most prominent.*

*Two objects of particular import were found inside. The first, which I have sent you along with this letter, is a set of Kemetian regalia imbued with tremendous magical power. Taking the form of a heka and nekhakha (as Professor Carnahan tells me they are called), they were placed atop a central pillar surrounded by a many-layered circle, which I believe served as the cornerstone of the wards protecting this place.*

*At first, I thought those wards merely weakened, but they have in fact completely collapsed, even though the regalia's power seems undiminished. It is my belief that the great working you performed over Londinium overwrote another one, inscribed upon these artefacts thousands of years ago.*

*Given the presence of an Imperial force in Kemet, which we learned of only thanks to the radio we brought with us, I thought it prudent to send the regalia ahead immediately, along with the rubbings and recordings we've already made. Perhaps using the regalia directly in the warding ritual instead of reaching across the sea, we will be able to protect our homeland more effectively.*

*The second object of interest, however, couldn't be moved easily, if at all. It is obvious at first glance that object wasn't constructed by the same hands that wrought the structure around it. Visually, it looks like a circle of black stone five meters in diameter and half a meter thick, embedded into the ground at the center of the building's various lines of fire and defensive positions, directly in front of the regalia's pillar. Looking through it, one sees not the other side of the room, however, but a swirling nexus of energies.*

*After inspecting the hieroglyphs carved on the walls of the room, we have come to the conclusion that this archway is of similar nature to the Wunderwaffe whose attack on Londinium you fought off : a portal leading to this Nameless City of Carnahan's translation, where the Ancient Kemetians fought against their mysterious enemy. The building around it must have been built while they were preparing to launch their assault through the gate after defeating the enemy forces within the rest of Kemet itself (though the story of the pillars lack in details, the victory of the priests is obvious).*

*As I write these words, we are planning to cross the gateway. A few sand lizards and desert foxes have been captured by our assistants and, after a quick spell on my part, sent through the archway, returning a few moments later none the worse for wear.*

*Within that Nameless City, I hope that we will find more clues as to how the victory of the priests was achieved, which will be of use in our present struggle against Division Y.*

*I remain, as ever, your faithful servant,*

*Niniane."*

Letter from Niniane to the Royal Wizard of the Allied Kingdom, written on October 5th, 1925.

---

*October 6th, 1925 – ?*

For a moment after he crossed the archway and beheld his surroundings, Carnahan thought he had died and gone to Hell. He wasn't certain what exactly he had done to warrant damnation, but that was the only explanation his stunned mind could come up with to explain what his eyes seeing.

The ground at his feet was littered with bones, many of them he recognized as human. All of them had been gnawed on and cracked apart, which his mind helpfully told him had probably been done to suck off the marrow within. Broken pieces of antique armor and weaponry was also scattered amidst the bones, testament to the violence of the conflict that had taken place here in ages past. That was already grim enough, but the horror beneath was nothing compared to the one above.

The skies were of a uniform pale color that reminded Carnahan of nothing more than a corpse's pallor, and a black sun shone with a cold and colorless light that, Carnahan noticed with horror, cast no shadow whatsoever.

Understandably, the sight proved quite a shock for the half-dozen guards who had accompanied Niniane and him across. They cried out and started praying and babbling, with several starting to move back toward the archway, desperate to get back to the desert and out of here.

"Enough !" said Niniane, freezing the would-be deserters in their tracks. "This is only an illusion. An impressive one, yes, but it isn't real. We must be in some sort of underground cavern, dug by magic in ancient times. We already know that spell formulas that can withstand the passage of millennia and keep working exist : this is just another example."

The young lady's explanation worked in calming down their escorts, but Carnahan was more familiar with her, and he could see she only half-believed it herself. He didn't point it out, not wanting the break their fragile morale, but it was still something to keep in mind. Wherever they were, he doubted it was as simple as a cavern that had stayed hidden all that time.

That impression was only confirmed when he heard a whirring noise coming out of his own pocket. Checking it, he found that his watch was going crazy, its hands moving in random directions far quicker than the machinery was designed for, to the point that within moments the entire thing broke down and stopped. The same, it turned out, had happened to every timepiece the group had brought along with them.

Again, Niniane was quick to reassure them that this was due to some kind of magical field in effect around the area that interfered with the delicate mechanisms of modern watches – an unintended side-effect, to be sure, since such devices hadn't existed at the time of the ruined city's construction. And yet Carnahan couldn't shake the feeling that, if they'd brought a simple sandglass with them, its contents would also be moving up and down without rhyme and reason. There was something wrong with the Nameless City, in a way that he couldn't describe but felt deep in his bones.

They had arrived at the center of a circular plaza over two hundred meters across, emerging from an archway identical to the one they had gone through – or perhaps it was the same, somehow existing in two places at once. Carnahan was no military man, but he could imagine that attacking through the small portal would have been a tactical nightmare. Even with the advantage of surprise, the first men sent through would've been completely alone and unsupported.

Buildings of black and grey stone surrounded the plaza, but what drew the eye the most – once you could tear your gaze from the eldritch sky – was the pyramid directly ahead of the gateway, at the end of a long, straight road that cut through the city. It was built of black stone, with a grey stairway leading up to what a quick look through his binoculars told him was an entrance inside, although the weird illumination of this place kept him from seeing too far inside.

"We are going to check out the pyramid first," said Niniane decisively. "It will provide us a good vantage point over the area, and it looks like the most obvious place to find something of interest."

They advanced in a tight group, the guards keeping their weapons at the ready, although they didn't encounter any threat. The closer they got to the pyramid, the more signs of battle they

saw. It was clear that whatever battle had been fought here in ancient times, it had become more and more intense as the attackers approached the towering structure : the street beneath their feet was cratered with what Niniane told them must've been battle magic (grenades not being exactly common in Ancient Kemet).

Even so, enough remained of the buildings around them for Carnahan to realize none of them had been built for human-sized inhabitants : they were simply too big. Since they knew that the people of Ancient Kemet hadn't been giants from having studied a lot of their bones, and given what Niniane had shared with him about the reason for their presence here, he'd the feeling this entire Nameless City had been built for and by monsters – a feeling only reinforced when he saw the first statue.

Past the courtyard where they had arrived, there were statues of grey stone everywhere, each of them depicting a monster in repose. For all the horror of what they represented, the artistry that had gone into the sculpting was masterful : it truly seemed as if the stone figures might come alive at any moment. Carnahan avoided looking at them too much, but he still noticed that there were only a few variations. Monstrous hybrids of serpent and man, like reptilian centaurs. Six-eyed horrors with far too large mouths and long, muscular tails. Skinny, spiked and scaled wolf-like beasts that seemed designed for cruelty. Three meters-tall walking abattoirs, all muscle and claws, with a single enormous eye.

… In fact, come to think of it, these monstrosities looked to be about the height he'd have expected the inhabitants of the buildings to be.

As they climbed up the steps of the pyramid, struggling to deal with steps twice higher than they ought to be, they got a better look at the ruined city. It was vast, and though judging the distance was made harder by the strange scale of the buildings, Carnahan judged it to stretch over several kilometers. Beyond it laid nothing but seemingly endless black sands, stretching all the way to the horizon : there were no mountains, no rivers, nothing. They hadn't seen a single sign of life since they'd arrived, not even insects.

"Have you noticed ?" Niniane asked quietly as they climbed. "There should be debris on this stairway, but it has been swept away."

"And some of the statues we passed were clearly put in place after the battle ended," added Carnahan with a nod, also keeping his voice low. "Survivors of the battle trying to clean up, do you think ?"

"It makes the most sense. Of course, they will be long dead by now."

"Of course," Carnahan agreed. Still, he couldn't stop himself from reaching for the pistol at his hip to check it was still there.

"The statues, at least, might be due to the attackers using their magic to petrify their enemy," Niniane continued thoughtfully. "The Empire used monsters on the Rhine Front : if their 'Devils' are related to what lurked here, I don't think the Ancient Kemetians would've had much of a chance against them without some kind of arcane counter."

"You, huh … you don't think the petrification spell could be broken, do you ?" asked Carnahan.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped at him. "Transforming flesh to stone is already an incredibly complex process. Reverting it would fly in the face of everything we know about the laws of magic and thermodynamics."

There wasn't much the Professor could say in answer to that, so they continued their climb. Eventually, they reached the entrance he'd spied through his binoculars. The black sun's shadowless light didn't penetrate inside the pyramid, and the flash lights they'd brought with them didn't work any better than his watch, but fortunately they'd also brought more basic torches along with them at Carnahan's recommendation – electric lights, while more powerful, were also less reliable in a sandy environment, so better to have a backup light source at hand.

They walked through a long corridor, before emerging into a large throneroom with an open roof that let the black sun's strange light through. It was clear that the battle had been at its most violent here. There were holes in the walls, floor and ceiling, and not one of the great statues that had lined the walls remained intact, most of them reduced to a pair of feet resting atop a pedestal.

An immense throne of obsidian sat at the end of the room, as damaged as everything else. Despite its state, it still radiated menace, as though only the most evil of tyrants could ever sit upon it. To the right of that monstrosity was a lesser, human-sized throne, and this one was occupied by a corpse, its skin blackened by time and dry decomposition into a vision of nightmare. It was clad in what appeared to be the garb of an Ancient Kemetian priest, but even from that distance Carnahan could tell there was something wrong about the iconography engraved upon it. A serpent-headed golden staff rested against the lesser throne, gleaming rubies encrusted in its eyes.

The group advanced cautiously, moving around the damaged sections of the floor and trying to pretend they didn't feel the temperature dropping as they drew closer to the two thrones. There were hieroglyphs carved at the base of the black throne, and Carnahan approached to see if he could translate them, when he was interrupted by a sudden scream.

The corpse on the lesser throne had moved, seizing the wrist of the closest guard with its withered right hand. Sparks of black lightning coursed down the animated cadaver's arm and plunged into the man's flesh. At once, the guard's body began to decay rapidly, yet he was horrifically still alive. His scream was the most hideous sound Carnahan had ever heard, but the silence that followed its ending was even worse. A plume of translucent smoke emerged from his ravaged throat and then was sucked into the undead thing's maw, blackened teeth closing behind it with terrible finality.

It stood up, moving slowly at first, then more and more assuredly, as if merely waking from a nap and shaking off the cobwebs of sleep. It seized the serpent-headed staff in its right hand, and turned its eyeless skull to look around, stopping while looking straight at Niniane and Carnahan. Its jaw opened again, revealing a dried tongue, and spoke in recognizable if heavily distorted Albish, although whether the distortion was an accent or the result of his decayed vocal chords Carnahan had no idea.

"I am the Heresiarch. First of the Black Pharaoh's servants. And you … you are a witch and a scholar," it – he – said. "Are you here on behalf of my master, to bring me back to his side ?"

For a single, crazed moment, Carnahan considered lying and saying yes. Then one of the remaining guards screamed and opened fire with his rifle, and the other four followed suit at once. Despite their panic, most of their shots hit their mark, and the Heresiarch growled as pieces of old bone flew at the impacts.

He shrieked, and gestured with his staff. A halo of black fire erupted around him, burning the following shots to ash. Then he pointed a finger at the closest guard, and he simply came apart, torn to pieces by invisible blades.

"Enough !" shouted Niniane, drawing her computation orb. Carnahan felt the pressure of gathering magical energy, saw the orb begin to gleam … then it sparked and whined, a pitiful sound that soon died down.

Of course, thought Carnahan with a clarity brought by despair. A computation orb was a delicate thing, far more elaborate than a watch. If the latter didn't work in this God-forsaken place, why would the former ?

"Was that supposed to do something ?" asked the Heresiarch, cocking his head to the side with a sickening crack of his ancient vertebrae. "Or is this what passes for magic in this age ?"

Niniane flushed, anger, it seemed, overcoming fear for a moment. She pulled a silver cross encrusted with diamonds out of her pocket and held it aloft. For a second Carnahan thought she was praying, but then the diamonds blazed with magic, and a dome of white light expanded from Niniane. The Heresiarch recoiled, his empty eye sockets suddenly flaring with black fire.

"This power," the creature snarled. "It is that of the Adversary !"

"RUN !" shouted Niniane, her face already running with sweat at the effort of doing whatever it was she was doing.

They ran, followed by the surviving guards. As they reached the outside, Niniane grabbed Carnahan's arm and flew into the air, plunging down the stairs and leaving the rest of their party behind.

"Wait ! We have to go back for them -"

"I can only carry you and fly at the same time, Professor," she cut him off in a tense voice. "And even that is straining the capabilities of this relic."

Carnahan was about to protest, but the words died in his throat as he heard more screams coming from the guards they'd abandoned.

"What the hell was that ?" he whispered to himself, but Niniane heard him and answered :

"This cross is a sacred relic that was lent to me by my master before I left. Modern computation orbs are only our attempts at emulating what those are capable of, and it seems there are features we didn't even realize were in the originals."

"That's interesting, but not what I was talking about," replied Carnahan with what he felt was remarkable calm given the circumstances. "I meant, what the hell was that monster ?!"

"That … I have no idea," Niniane admitted. "Wait. Look. Is that … ?"

Before their horrified eyes, the grotesque statues were starting to move, stone transmuting into monstrous flesh, the answer to the mystery of their presence, intact when so much of the city around them was damaged, now made terribly clear. The creatures were even more horrifying in motion than they had been while petrified.

'The laws of thermodynamics', Niniane had said. Could it be ? Was the Nameless City really … No, it didn't matter right now. 'How' and 'why' were irrelevant questions. What mattered was that, on the way to the pyramid, they had seen scores of the statues. How many more were there across the Nameless City, now awakening from their age-long slumber at the call of their master – or, as the Heresiarch had implied, their true master's servant ?

For thousands of years, the Heresiarch and the petrified monsters had been sealed away in the Nameless City, trapped by the ward powered by the regalia – which was probably half-way to Kheriaha, there to be shipped off to Londinium with the most express haste. The ward had already been broken when they'd arrived, disturbed by the Royal Wizard's efforts to protect the Kingdom's capital, but it was only because they had gone through the gateway that the Heresiarch had noticed the way was open for him and his host of horrors.

"God," Carnahan rasped out. "What have we done ?"

---

*"Colonel, something's wrong."*

*"Elaborate, Captain."*

*"Ever since my transformation, my senses have been sharper even when I'm not transformed. I'm not sure what, but I can sense … something, to the south. It's making the new part of me distinctly uncomfortable, and … angry, I think."*

*"… Scheiße. Take Captain Weiss with you as backup and in case you need a quicker escape, and go take a look. I will warn General Romel to put everyone on high alert, just in case. Be careful !"*

*"Yes sir !"*

Radio exchange within the Imperial Southern Expedition, October 6th, 1925.

---

*October 6th, 1925 – Bardad Desert*

The camels were running without needing to be told : they could smell what was behind them, and clearly found it just as disturbing as their riders did. Carnahan had spent years riding the beasts, and he never knew they could even move that fast, but he knew it wouldn't be fast enough. The camels were built for endurance, not sprint, and the monsters hunting them seemed tireless.

"You should fly ahead, Miss !" he shouted to Niniane. "Leave me behind and save yourself !"

Carnahan didn't think of himself as a brave man – in fact, he fully intended to turn his pistol on himself before letting the beasts get to him. But if Niniane could escape and find the regalia then maybe, just maybe, she would figure out a way to stop what they had unleashed.

"I've already exhausted my reserves," she replied with a grim smile. "We'll survive this together, or die together, Professor."

As touching as the words were, they did nothing to help their situation. A few moments later, the camels finally collapsed, unable to run any further, their hearts bursting in their chest. Carnahan stumbled to his feet and moved to help Niniane to hers, but before they could start running (not that it would have helped much), their pursuers reached them.

There were three of them, each a different type of the Nameless City's no-longer-petrified horrors : a serpent hybrid, a spindly wolf-beast, and one of the tailed monstrosities with six eyes and a far too large mouth. Returned to flesh, they were far more abhorrent, with the wolf-like beast in particular emanating a repugnant miasma that made Carnahan feel sick just to be near it.

Seeing the predicament of their prey, they advanced slowly, like cats playing with a mouse before delivering the killing blow. Carnahan aimed his pistol at them hesitantly, unsure if he shouldn't rather shoot Niniane and then himself.

Then a beam of concentrated light slammed through the skull of the snake, and its headless corpse fell to the ground, twitching.

The remaining two monsters stopped in their tracks, eyes turning upward. A man in an Imperial Army uniform descended from the sky, stopping right above the sand with a suddenness that made Carnahan's spine ache in sympathy, and rammed a mage blade into the skull of the wolf-thing, too fast for it to react. By that point, the last monster had overcome its shock, and lurched at the mage, its impossibly wide maw open, revealing row after row of hungry teeth.

Instead of dodging, the Imperial mage moved inside the monster's guard and slammed his entire right arm into its mouth. There was a gagging sound as the punch connected, but the monster didn't let that stop it, and closed its jaw upon his arm. Carnahan grimaced, expecting to hear the sound of flesh being bitten off (which, due to an encounter with a crocodile in his youth, wouldn't be the first time). Instead, there was a muffled detonation, and the entire upper half of the last monster exploded outward, splattering the soldier's magic shield.

As the Imperial mage withdrew his arm from the gory mess he had created, the limb was revealed to be made not of flesh, but of a white material that reminded Carnahan of porcelain,

but had to be incomparably tougher to have withstood the monster's bite undamaged.

The man inspected his arm for signs of damage, muttering something about 'owing old Gehrman a drink', then turned to look at them.

"Hello there," he said in heavily accented Albish (although the Imperial accent was, to be honest, a wondrous relief after hearing the Heresiarch's own hateful voice). "I am Captain Weiss of the Imperial Army, Division Y." He smiled thinly as the two of them flinched at the name of the Empire's mysterious makers of superweapons. "I see you have heard of us. Good, that will save us some time. You can either surrender yourselves peacefully into the custody of the Imperial Army, or you can refuse, in which case you will still be taken captives, just with some added steps. And I really don't think any of us can afford to waste time right now."

As if to make his point, four-winged horror with blazing, many-faceted eyes descended from the heavens with a buzzing noise, and Carnahan screamed in warning, but the Imperial mage didn't react. He merely glanced at the professor with a questioning look, before appearing to realize something :

"Oh, right. Don't worry. This one's safe."

"Safe ?!" Carnahan shrieked. He was being hysterical, he knew it, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Well, maybe not for you, if you keep screaming, so shut up for a moment." He switched to Imperial when he addressed the creature : "Uger, what did you see ?"

The monster stared at him, then cocked its head at the two citizens of the Allied Kingdom. It was clearly trying to imply something, but Carnahan had no idea what.

"Ah, right," said Weiss with an embarrassed chuckle. "Can't show state secrets to outsiders, I forgot. I must've spent too much time at the headquarters and not enough in the field. Don't tell the boss, please ? She would have my hide for a slip-up like that. For now, let's get back to base. Hold on tight, we'll be going fast." He switched back to Albish : "As for the two of you, don't struggle or you will fall."

"What do you -"

Before Niniane could finish, he had seized them by the arm and they were flying, a lot faster than what Niniane had managed with her relic, fast enough that Carnahan had to close his eyes to avoid being blinded by the sand in the wind. The two Albish explorers clung to the aerial mage as best they could, trying to ignore the monster doing the same with two of its four arms.

"Now, my new friends from the Allied Kingdom," he heard the Imperial mage say. "I have questions. And if you know what's good for you, you will answer them honestly. Let's start with : what the hell were you doing in the middle of the desert ?"

*October 6th, 1925 – Bardad Desert – Imperial Camp*

Colonel Lergen listened with growing alarm as Captains Uger and Weiss finished their report. The two Albish agents were in custody elsewhere in the camp, having been searched and stripped of all their equipment. Much as he wanted to question them further (and shake them and scream at them and ask them what the hell they thought they had been doing), they were clearly in a state of shock, and pushing them for answers wouldn't get them anywhere quickly enough to matter. Captain Weiss had already gotten the gist of what had happened from them on the flight back to base, shock and terror making them both more loose-lipped than they'd probably have been under less dire circumstances.

And the circumstances were dire, no mistake about that. Division Y had been sent to the Southern Continent to investigate and stop the Allied Kingdom's efforts to make use of Ancient Kemetian magic, but the notes Degurechaff had sent him also contained a full dissertation on the potential of the Albish waking up something they couldn't control or deal with.

The Colonel very carefully didn't think about how strangely prescient that paper had been and very deliberately chose to ascribe it to the Major's over-cautious approach to all things related to Elder Magic. Although given the situation, it might be that she wasn't over-cautious at all after all. This whole mess fell squarely into such a case, and her notes were clear on what to do.

"We must deal with this," he declared without preamble once the two officers were done with their tale.

"Must we ?" asked one of General Romel's aides.

It was a reasonable question, Lergen told himself to avoid snapping at the man. This wasn't their country, and the problem had been caused by Albish stupidity. However, it also missed a very important point, that should be obvious to anyone thinking about it for more than a second.

"Yes," replied Lergen without hesitation. "Who do you think will be blamed if a horde of monsters starts slaughtering civilians right after we arrived in the country ?"

That brought a swift end to any argument. It might be Albish meddling that had caused this catastrophe, but good luck trying to tell the rest of the world that.

"For now, they aren't moving," said Uger with a frown, intently listening to something only he could hear. "But there are more and more of them coming through. And they are predators : eventually they'll get hungry … and I think there is only one type of prey that will satisfy their hunger."

*Merciful God,* thought Lergen, swallowing to wet his dry throat. "The Nile hasn't moved in thousands of years. If they are looking for people, they will know where to go to find them."

The look on Captain Uger's face told Lergen that he didn't care about the political implications. Sometimes Lergen wondered how the man had become a soldier : he was far

too good-hearted to work in the Imperial Army. Oh, he was willing to fight and kill the enemy well enough (although how much of that was due to his transformation into a Werwolf, Lergen would never know, not having met the man prior to his transformation).

"The closest city to their position is Kheriaha," said another aide, pointing at the map on the table around which they all stood. "There are, what, about a million people there ? Surely even a few hundred monsters cannot kill them all."

"That doesn't matter," cut in General Romel. "Our stated mission is to put pressure on the Allied Kingdom to get them to the negotiation table. If they think we unleashed monsters on a civilian population, or even just if they can spin the story to make other countries believe we did, then nobody will negotiate with us, ever. We will be marked as monsters ourselves, and our only choices will be destruction or world domination. Which," the General added after Lergen sent him a stern look, "is not the will of High Command."

*Damn right it isn't,* thought Lergen. If the Empire fully committed to its Wunderwaffen program and gave Division Y unlimited access to the country's resources, it might – might – actually be able to conquer the world. But the human cost of such an endeavour was inconceivable.

"So come on, my fine fellows." General Romel was smiling, looking like a wild animal who has caught sight of prey. "Put some smiles on those grim faces ! Fighting against an ancient evil in the middle of the desert to protect the innocent, not knowing the strength of the foe ? This sounds like quite the saga ! Now, ladies and gentlemen. Let us carve our names into legend together !"

Somehow, Lergen wasn't surprised by Romel's reaction to it all. He still wasn't sure whether the General's boisterous behavior was genuine or an act meant to inspire confidence in his troops, but at least the man was competent and willing to listen to advice.

He also really wanted a drink. Unfortunately, word of his doctor's advice had spread among the elements of Division Y he was theoretically leading, and apparently General Romel had been informed at some point. As a result, 'out of respect for him and his determination to follow medical instructions', there wasn't a bottle of alcohol in sight within the command center. Not that the Imperial Army was normally led by drunkards, but there was always something, to celebrate victory or toast departing units (and, in a pinch, double as disinfectant).

He would have to soldier on, then. On the plus side, if his inability to get a stiff drink was the worst thing that happened to him today, he would be perfectly happy to remain sober for the rest of the war.

---

*October 6th, 1925 – Bardad Desert – Ancient Kemetian Settlement*

The Heresiarch couldn't breathe, and his skin had long since decayed past all sense of touch. Yet as he gazed upon the blue sky, he still felt something akin to joy within his withered soul.

At long, long last, he had returned to his homeland. For all its glory and majesty, there were still aspects of his master's wondrous city that were lacking compared to this place. Not nearly enough sacrifices, for one.

Behind him, more and more of his master's creations were pouring out of the gateway. They were the blessed ones, granted rebirth and freedom from their weak mortal forms as their flesh was reshaped into an aspect more suitable to serve the Black Pharaoh by the Rite of Transfiguration. Many had perished during the battle that had seen their master fall, but there had been plenty left, trapped within the Nameless City by the ward cast by their victorious foe.

To keep them from devouring each other and eventually starving to death, the Heresiarch had used a spell first gifted to him by the Black Pharaoh for use on captured enemies. It could only be cast within the Black Pharaoh's kingdom, where the will of his master prevailed over what fools called natural laws, but it had preserved the last remnant of his lord's army throughout the ages … until now.

He did not know how much time had passed, but he knew his master was walking the earth once more. Nothing else could have led these foolish mortals to break the seal that had kept him and the other survivors trapped within their master's city.

He couldn't feel the hunters who'd gone after the intruders carrying the tool of the Adversary anymore, meaning they'd been more dangerous than he thought. But he knew in which direction they had been running, and their plan was obvious. If they weren't merely running for their miserable lives, they would be looking for the hateful relic which had powered the seal that had kept the Heresiarch trapped.

Except, the intruders had been northerners. And clearly the priest caste that the Heresiarch had once belonged to before having his eyes opened to the truth no longer existed, or the seal would never have been broken in the first place. Even if they recovered the regalia, they didn't have the knowledge to use it effectively.

The dessicated skin of his face cracked into a vile parody of a smile. Oh, he was going to enjoy this.

The Heresiarch raised his staff, and spoke words that were to Kemetian what a scream of agony is to a lullaby. Harsh winds began to stir in answer, and soon a sandstorm covered the constructions of his old foes, violent enough to start eroding the markings they had carved to celebrate their victory.

"Let us go to glorious war, then," he said. "We shall make Kemet bleed, until it remembers its one true king."

Behind and around him, the horde of the Black Pharaoh's servants howled in response.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Oh, Lergen. Why do I torture you so ? I hadn't even planned that last bit. Someone suggested something like it on SB and the Muse ran with it.

You probably saw Things Going Wrong for the Albish explorers coming. Nevertheless, I hope you enjoyed the scene of them exploring the Nameless City (which is not Irem, the City of Pillars, as according to Achtung Cthulhu ! Guide to North Africa the entrance to that one is located on the Arabian peninsula, much to the east of where this takes place). Turns out Projekt S wasn't the first gateway to another world to exist. What does this all mean ? Once again, I'm not going to tell you yet. Feel free to speculate.

Also, it turns out that Tagers can't talk while transformed. They can use telepathy to communicate with others of their kind within a certain radius, but everything I've found indicates that ability only works with other Tagers, not ordinary people. Hence Uger looking at Weiss silently asking if he really thinks he's going to transform in front of civilians. I had completely forgotten about that until I wrote the scene and realized "hey, what does Uger sound like while transformed ? No, wait a minute, how the hell is Uger talking here since Whispers don't have mouths ?".

I could probably have gotten away with him using telepathy anyway, but then I wouldn't have had the chance to make Weiss embarrass himself and show that he's still as scared of Tanya in this universe as in canon. And that would be unacceptable.

Yes, the monsters are Dhohanoids from CthulhuTech. I could have gone with standard Egyptian undead, but come on. That would have been predictable and boring.

Also, if you are wondering how Weiss was able to kill three of them so easily : YS aerial mages are freaking terrifying when they know what they are doing, and Weiss definitely does. There is a reason Tanya only sends the Werwölfe out with the support of the Untoten : the Werwölfe can potentially kill a mage if they get close enough (for instance, as seen in their first deployment on the Rhine front, a Phantom's beam attack can go right through a mage's shields due to the spell formula not being designed for that kind of eldritch energy), but the range of an aerial mage's attack spells is vastly superior to the ranged abilities of the Werwölfe. Although, to be clear, Werwölfe/Tagers are superior to Dhohanoids in every way : in the original lore, one Tager is considered the equal of five Dhohanoids when it comes to battle.

Well, the Dhohanoids have two advantages : the first is that they can use partial transformations (like turning one limb instead of their whole body). The second is that Dhohanoids can breed true, unlike Tagers (and Werwölfe, although the situation hasn't come up so far, much to Tanya's relief).

As for who the Black Pharaoh is, I look forward to your theories. I know the truth, of course (because, as I have said before and will say again, this is fanfiction, not Game of Thrones : we have storytelling standards here), but it will be a long time before it is revealed to you.

The Muse is currently punishing me for finishing Prince of the Eye instead of focusing on this story, but I managed to complete this chapter regardless of Her displeasure.

Please submit theories, suggestions, and additions to the TV Tropes page in order to appease Her.

This chapter and the next one were originally going to be a single chapter, but I decided to split them because their themes are quite different. This chapter was a mix of horror and Indiana Jones-style exploration, while the next one will be a detailled depiction of the battle between the Imperial Southern Expedition and the Horde of the Nameless City.

If anyone can recommend me some good sources on desert warfare in WW1/WW2 era I could use as reference/inspiration, that would be appreciated.

Alright, that's all for now. Stay safe !

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Though the Battle of the Rhine was the first recorded instance of supersoldiers fighting in an organized manner (the events of the Eclipsed Liberation being a special case), the Defense of Kheriaha was still the first time the Imperial army went into battle expecting to fight an enemy possessing its own form of Elder Magic.*

*The forces of the Imperial Southern Expedition (ISE), under the overall command of General von Romel, amounted to two full divisions of the Imperial Army, along with two scores of Werwölfe (made up of twenty Phantom-types, fifteen Mirage-types, five Spectre-types, and Captain Uger, at the time the only instance of the Whisper-type), five Untoten (all of whom had participated in the Battle of the Rhine and had ingested Endlose Nacht to fight the Eikons), two companies of soldiers equipped with M-912s, and a demi-company of six aerial mages trained in the use of the D-24 computation orb, led by Captain Weiss. All Division Y assets were under the command of Colonel von Lergen.*

*Aerial reconnaissance was limited to aerial mages, the only ones capable of navigating the supernatural sandstorm covering the Heresiarch's advance. Even they struggled to get a clear picture of the enemy force, their estimates ranging from four hundreds to over a thousand. This was due both to the storm obscuring visibility and to the unconventional nature of the enemy, whose lack of formation made the standard techniques for evaluating the numbers of a modern army all but useless.*

*At the time, there were some among the Division Y contingent who argued that an agreement might be reached with the Heresiarch. As the Director had recruited the Nazzadi to the Empire, they believed the Heresiarch and his troops could be persuaded to join the Empire's ranks, despite the innate hatred the Werwölfe felt for them. However, events soon proved that such would be impossible."*

Excerpt from the final Division Y report and tactical analysis of the battle between elements of the Imperial Southern Expedition and the hordes of the Nameless City, added to the records on December 5th, 1925.

---

*October 6th, 1925 – Bardad Desert*

Weiss could hear the nomads' screams as he flew, and cursed himself for his powerlessness.

The desert tribe had been small, barely a score of people who had just lived their lives as their ancestors had for generations. When they'd seen the skies darkening, they had gone to ground, erecting their tents and preparing to weather the storm. Despite its unnatural potency, they might have succeeded at that – but nobody could have been prepared for the monsters that marched in its shadow.

Now most of them were dead, and those who yet lived surely wished they weren't. For, living and dead, all had become food for the hungry horrors of the Nameless City. The monsters advanced without anything even vaguely resembling a supply train : as far as Weiss and the other aerial mages had been able to determine, they were sustaining themselves by eating those of their own number that couldn't defend themselves. He had no idea how many had already fallen to these grotesque acts of cannibalism, but clearly it hadn't been enough to sate their monstrous hunger.

Weiss wished he was back there, fighting. But he knew this wasn't a battle he could win. Ten, twenty of these fiends – perhaps he could take those down, so long as he stayed in the air. But there were scores of them. And maybe he could still kill them all – they didn't appear to have ranged attacks after all. But even if he'd done that, he couldn't have saved the nomads. All he could've done was grant them a quicker death than the one they'd gotten at the hands of the fiends.

He would still have done so, if not for the burden he was carrying away from the fight. He and the other two mages of his scout group were each carrying two children in their arms. They'd had to knock them unconscious : they'd been hysterical, and might have fallen off.

When they had found the fight, the nomads had been fighting to keep the monsters away from these children, desperately offering up their lives so that they might have a chance of escape. Acting on impulse and without orders, Weiss had moved to pick them up, his companions following his lead without question.

It was a small thing, but making sure the adults' sacrifice wasn't in vain was the only thing they could do. He'd no idea what they'd do with the kids, but he knew he'd never have forgiven himself if he had left them behind.

This was what the Allied Kingdom had unwittingly unleashed upon Kemet. This was what the Major was afraid of, the reason why she'd put so many restrictions on Division Y's activities, why so many spells, rituals and artefacts remained locked away in the vaults of Castle Schwartzstein because they didn't meet her exacting standards of effectiveness and, far more importantly, reliability. Weiss knew more about the reasons for her rules than most – he'd lost his right arm fighting one of the things that'd manifested in the castle due to someone thinking they knew better than her, after all – but this was still a sobering reminder.

*We will stop them,* he swore to himself, forcing himself not to tighten his grip on the two unconscious children he carried.

*We will kill them all for this.*

---

*"I should come to assist you in person."*

*"No, Major. You know that Operation Enigma requires your presence in the Empire at this time."*

*"Hundreds of man-eating monsters led by an undead sorcerer marching toward a city of more than a million inhabitants seems to me like a situation that should overrides the needs of*

*Operation Enigma, Colonel !"*

*"Perhaps. I certainly am glad that you think so. But what if this happens again elsewhere ? You cannot be everywhere at once, Major. We need to make sure that your presence isn't an absolute requirement to victory, or else what even is the point of having an Empire ? Besides, it's unlikely you could make it in time to help, unless you have already managed to get Projekt S working again. Is that the case ?"*

*"... No. We are still months at best from repairing the gateway or building a new one, and that's if we can secure the necessary materials, which isn't looking likely."*

*"See ? Even if you push yourself to the limit, and somehow don't draw the attention of every ship in the Inner Sea with a functioning magical detector, you'll still arrive too late. No, we will have to deal with this on our own. Besides, the only way your presence could shift the battlefield would be if you used the Kosmosblut again, and we have other options before we resort to that again so soon. Now, if you have any advice for how to deal with the situation, that would be welcome."*

*"Of course, sir. First, I suggest that you ..."*

Excerpt of the long-range communication between Major Tanya Degurechaff and Colonel Eric von Lergen, done through the assistance of Captain Johann-Mattäus Weiss, October 6th, 1925.

---

*"Following the discovery of their cannibalistic appetites, the creatures of the Nameless City were given the name of Fiends, and the decision was made to ensure their complete eradication.*

*Without hard data on their capabilities, General Romel chose to assume they were the equivalent of the Werwölfe. In hindsight, this would prove to be over-cautious, but the General can hardly be blamed for the decision.*

*At the time, all that was known of the Fiends was that there existed different types of them, that they had endured being petrified for thousands of years, that they could move through the desert quickly, and that the Werwölfe had an instinctive hatred for them and urge to destroy them. The brief engagement by Captain Weiss had also revealed they shared the weakness of Projekt W to powerful attack spells directed to the skull, but then that is a weakness shared by pretty much every living thing on the planet.*

*With little time before the Heresiarch reached Kheriaha, General Romel ordered a rapid advance south-east, going straight for the Kemetian capital with his mechanized elements and troop transports, while the aerial mages (both those affiliated with Division Y and not) and the Untoten performed reconnaissance ahead of the main force and continued to keep watch on the Fiends' advance.*

*This course of action left the ISE exposed to the remaining troops of the Allied Kingdom in Kemet, the bulk of which was stationed at Arigzandria, the Kingdom's main base of operations within Kemet. Prior to the discovery of the Nameless City's threat, the ISE had*

*been preparing for an assault on Arigzandria in order to decapitate the Kingdom's military presence in the region, but this was no longer possible.*

*To prevent the Allied Kingdom from interfering, General Romel decided to resort to a rather unconventional gambit, one that used the unique assets at his disposal while also serving the purposes of Operation Enigma ..."*

---

*"To the commander of the Allied Kingdom military base of Arigzandria,*

*By now, you must have learned of the unnatural sandstorm that formed in the Bardad desert and is moving east toward Kheriaha. Given the presence of the Empire's forces within Kemet, you may even believe us to be responsible for it.*

*I assure you that such is not the case. No, the situation is far worse than you can imagine.*

*An entire army of monsters, similar in strength to the Wunderwaffen your nation refers to as the Devils of the Rhine, advances under the cover of this storm, unleashed from their prison by the misguided efforts of your own government's agents. It is led by an ancient Kemetian sorcerer who, thousands of years ago, waged war against the entirety of Ancient Kemet before being defeated through means as yet unknown.*

*Unlike our Devils, these Fiends have no regards for the laws of war whatsoever. Our scouts have witnessed them devouring unlucky humans caught in the path of their advance. This, along with the flesh of their own weaker members, seems to be their sole method of supplying themselves.*

*And, as best as we can tell, they are going straight for Kheriaha.*

*I would like to appeal to your rationality, but I have learned, as have all officers of the Empire, that other nations do not put the same faith in logic and reason as we do. And I am too cynical a soldier to call upon your common decency and humanity. So, instead, I am forced to resort to base threats.*

*Our forces are currently advancing toward Kheriaha, as fast and as directly as we're able. It is our intent to defend the city and its inhabitants from a fate worse than death, at the cost of our own lives if necessary.*

*If you try to move your troops to strike at us while we are saving the city you are supposed to protect from the threat your government's agents unleashed, you and your entire command circle will die. You may think you can protect yourself from us, but believe me when I say that you cannot. There is no wall, no guard, no defense that will save you should you incur our wrath.*

*You may send observers, though I recommend they keep their distances.*

*Kindly inform your colleagues in Kheriaha itself that we expect not to be stabbed in the back while doing their job for them either.*

*I hope you will do the right thing,*

*Colonel Eric von Lergen."*

Letter found stabbed with a standard Imperial Army knife to the pillow of the Allied Kingdom field marshal of Arigzandria, October 7th, 1925.

---

*October 7th, 1925 – Outskirts of Kheriaha*

From atop his palanquin, the Heresiarch looked at the defenses standing between him and the city he'd come to conquer. The sandstorm his sorcery had created would have blinded a mortal man, but he saw clearly, sensing the life-force of the warriors massed between him and the city's beacon-like radiance.

Once, the Heresiarch had commanded tens of thousands of blessed warriors in the name of his lord. But by the time of the last battle, their enemies, empowered by the hated Adversary, had reduced that number to a fraction, and more still had been lost in the final confrontation. They had made the priests pay in blood, oh yes, but in the end they had still lost. When he'd unmade the petrification spell, barely a thousand of the transfigured warriors had remained, and a fifth had perished on the way there to satiate the hunger of their fellows. What remained was a remnant of a remnant, unworthy of being named the Black Pharaoh's army.

But that would change in time. In fourteen days, the new moon would be upon them, and he would be able to start replenishing his army's numbers from the population of the city. Fourteen days would be plenty of time to subjugate the hundreds of thousands of souls he could sense, break them to his will using his sorcery and the strength of his warriors.

Yes, this city he saw in the distance, far larger than any the Heresiarch had ever seen before, would provide him with everything he needed to begin rebuilding his master's kingdom. But first, he needed to crush the fools who dared to stand in his way.

The memories he had claimed from the souls he'd devoured upon his awakening were fragmented and incomplete : the process had never been perfect, and it had taken him some time to shake off the dust of his epochal slumber. But the Heresiarch still knew that Man had designed new ways to kill his fellow since he had last walked this land, and that the strange, pitiful weapons his first victims had wielded in vain against him were but the least of the new instruments of death that defined this era's warfare.

Added to this strange devices of iron, these 'firearms', mortals had also found new ways to use magic. As his army advanced through the desert, the Heresiarch had sensed human mages in the distance, flying through the air and striking at those who went too far from the rest of the horde. They hadn't dared approach him, and so had evaded their rightful punishment, for now.

That would change soon. He could feel their power within the hastily constructed structures that stood between him and the city. He could easily have ordered his forces to simply go around, but he was loathe to leave a hostile force alive. In the past, he'd allowed survivors of his battles to escape to spread word of the dark majesty of his lord, but some of these

survivors had come back, granted weapons by the Adversary, and had contributed to the fall of his master. He would not repeat those mistakes. Those who dared stand in the way of the true master of Kemet's right hand would all perish.

But he would also be cautious. With a mental command, the four one-eyed giants carrying his palanquin lowered it to the ground, with a degree of finesse that would have astonished anyone looking at them.

The Heresiarch stood up, and pointed forward with his staff. The blessed ones were powerful, but he'd found it was best to keep his orders simple when it came to such things.

"Kill," he said simply, his words carried to the mind of every single warrior under his command by the power of the authority bestowed upon him by the Black Pharaoh when he'd shed the life of his mortal body for this new, purer existence. "Kill them all, in the name of our lord !"

---

*"During the march toward Kheriaha, General Romel dispatched his fliers to continue scouting the enemy advance, as well as harass them whenever the opportunity to do so without risking their lives presented itself. The occultists of Division Y assigned to the ISE also requested for corpses of Fiends to study while on the move (their demands for live specimens having been immediately quashed by Colonel Lergen).*

*It was at that time that Division Y learned that, like the supersoldiers of the Empire, the Fiends are created from human subjects. Upon death, they revert to their human appearance, clothes and accessories emerging from their inhuman flesh as it morphs back to its former aspect – all of them of Ancient Kemetian stock. Most of the recovered bodies were clad in little more than rags, but others were completely naked, leading to the speculation that they had somehow been born that way, since unlike the Werwölfe the Fiends appeared to be able to remain in their inhuman forms indefinitely.*

*While interesting from a research perspective, this new knowledge had little impact on the strategic side of things – apart from the added complication of the need to ensure nobody outside of the ISE stumbled upon the remains of the battle to come, lest the Empire's image be tainted by the ensuing misunderstanding that the Imperial Army had slaughtered a bunch of unarmed civilians.*

*Upon reaching their destination, the ISE immediately set to work building up defensive positions. With only a few hours before the arrival of the Heresiarch, there was no time for anything elaborate, though the veterans of the Rhine Front did their best under the circumstances (the terrain being much different from the mud of the Rhine in which they were used to digging trenches). These preparations continued until the last possible moment, when the Heresiarch's storm reached them, and the Defense of Kheriaha began ..."*

---

*October 7th, 1925 – Outskirts of Kheriaha – Imperial Defensive Positions*

Visibility was a myth. Every soldier was wearing some kind of eye protection, but they were still lucky if they could see ten meters in front of them. Even with his passively enhanced

senses, Uger could only see clearly twenty or so meters, though fortunately his more mystical senses weren't impaired by the storm, allowing him to know just how far away the horde of Fiends was.

That ability was the reason he had been entrusted with field command of the first line of defense, but he didn't need his enhanced senses to know the men around him were afraid. Even the hardened veterans of the Rhine and the men who had spent months working security within Castle Schwartzstein were worried by the unnatural storm that blackened the sky, and the disturbing howls that emanated from it.

"Do you hear that ?" he said loudly. His words were also being broadcast over the radio, to every soldier squatting in the trenches.

The soldiers around him looked at each other, unsure how to respond.

"I ask, do you hear that ?" He repeated.

This time, there were a handful of hesitating positive replies. Uger nodded.

"That, my friends, is the sound of madness. It is the chorus of damnation, of beasts who come to feast upon human flesh."

Word of what the Fiends had done to the nomads they'd encountered had spread across the troops. The officers hadn't tried to suppress it, reasoning that anger would give the soldiers more motivation to hold their ground – and that they deserved to know what exactly they faced.

It was to their credit that, despite this, not one of them had raised any protest at their orders. They were already brave : Uger just needed to remind them of that.

"All of you have known doubt and horror as you killed your fellow man. None of us who fought on the Rhine Front love war, and that is well."

It was not something soldiers liked to talk about, nor were they supposed to. But Uger had learned long ago that almost nobody in the Imperial Army actually liked killing people, and those who did were often given special assignments to take advantage of that (and, Uger suspected, keep them away from the rest of the troops).

"But rejoice !" He continued, forcing a smile on his face and in his voice. "For today, there is no cause for doubt. Today, there is no need for hesitation, for qualms and pangs of conscience."

After his transformation, despite how deliriously grateful he'd been to be healed from his certain doom, Uger had still harboured doubts. Becoming a Werwolf came with certain mental adjustments, and Uger was self-aware enough to realize he probably would've reacted a lot worse otherwise, but those didn't completely cover the shock of what the Rite of Union had done to him. He'd wondered if he'd become a monster, someone who only had a place and purpose in war.

In the end, he'd gone to the Major for answers. She'd looked at him in silence for a long time, before saying :

'The Rite of Union did not make you into a monster, Captain. Our actions are what decide what we are.' She had smiled then, and Uger was certain there had been a degree of wistfulness in it. 'You and your brethren are sheepdogs, meant to protect the flock from wolves. Remember that.'

Now, facing the Fiends, the sheepdog comparison felt more apt than ever.

"Today, you stand as the only line of defense between man and monster !" He shouted. "For if we fall, the citizens of Kemet will die. They will be devoured by the monsters before us. Men, women and children : none will be spared, for it is true evil we face today."

Kheriaha couldn't be evacuated. There were just too many people living in it, and its government was aligned with the Empire's enemies in Albion (although like every Imperial officer, Uger knew that alignment wasn't exactly voluntary). Uger trusted that General Romel's measures to secure their backs would work. All that mattered was one question :

*How many children in Kheriaha right now ?*

The answer was simple. Even one would be more than enough. And so …

"You are all soldiers, sworn to protect the Fatherland. To fight, kill, and die, in defense of those you love. That is what we are. Protectors. Guardians. Though our hands may be drenched in blood, we fight not for glory or greed, but to defend those who cannot defend themselves !"

There were cheers from the trenches now, defiant and proud, and Uger continued, feeling the fire of his own spirit rising along with theirs :

"To fight here today may not be the letter of our oaths, for this is not the Reich. But it is in the spirit of what we all swore."

The howls of the Fiends became louder and louder, and he saw that they were almost upon them. Time to wrap this up, then.

"SOLDIERS OF THE EMPIRE !" Captain Uger roared. "FOR THE REICH ! FOR KHERIAHA ! FOR ALL THAT WE CHERISH ! OPEN FIRE !"

And as bullets and bolts of energy from the M-912s tore through the air and slammed into the mass of horrors charging them, Uger leapt out of the trench, his human body already being covered by the supernatural flesh of his Werwolf self. All across the frontline, the rest of the Werwölfe followed his lead, and the scions of Projekt W counter-charged the Fiends of the Nameless City.

The melee was immediate and brutal. The Fiends were drawn to the Werwölfe, driven by the same innate hatred Uger's brethren felt for the cannibal monsters. In his Whisper form, Uger's senses were almost completely unaffected by the sandstorm, giving him an unparalleled grasp

of the battle. He buzzed above the melee, firing razor-sharp wings, punching and kicking skulls in where he could, while at the same time maintaining a constant watch.

One of the Phantom-types had stayed behind in the command post. There, he could relay to General Romel what Uger saw thanks to the mental link between Werwölfe, and act as a bodyguard if the enemy attempted a decapitating strike. As he fought, Uger sent him all the intel he could think of. Individual bullets were little more than a nuisance to the Fiends, but the M-912s tore through their flesh, and the heavy guns pierced through their hide and made them bleed. And the Werwölfe were superior to the Fiends – that much was obvious.

The Untoten flew with the storm, fighting in the fullness of their power, Colonel Lergen having authorized the unrestricted use of their precious supply of preserved mage blood for this battle. Though the sandstorm blotted out the sun, it was still day, and so they wore their full uniforms, their faces hidden by their gas masks as they plunged from the darkened skies to tear Fiends apart before vanishing back into the very cover the monsters' master had provided them.

With all the training he'd gone through in military school, Uger could read the flow of battle easily enough. They were winning. It wouldn't be easy : the Fiends kept advancing, heedless of their casualties, and the Werwölfe had to keep moving to avoid being pinned down and stop their enemies from breaking into the trenches and slaughtering the soldiers providing support fire. At one point, he was forced to choose between rescuing a Mirage from having his throat torn out by one of the hulking cyclops and preventing a gaggle of snake-like things from reaching the trenches, and chose the latter.

In other places, the too-thin line of Werwölfe had been breached through completely, leaving Imperial soldiers to fight the Fiends in close quarters, a terrifying prospect they were woefully under-equipped for. The handful of Werwölfe General Romel had kept in reserve did their best to plug these breaches, but they couldn't be everywhere at once, and casualties started to mount as the Fiends vented their malice on the mere mortals who dared stand in their way.

But they were winning. Which meant … there it was. Uger's preternatural senses screamed in warning, and he turned his head toward the source of the threat.

The Heresiarch walked through the chaos of battle, seeming wholly unconcerned by it all. He raised his serpent-headed staff, and a beam of black energy erupted out of the sculpted reptile's mouth, bisecting one of the Phantoms in the blink of an eye. A flick of the wrist, and the beam moved across the battlefield in a straight line. It punched through stone and slaughtered an entire squad of infantry, detonating a pair of M-912s and turning the gore to ash in a single cerulean flash.

Now, Uger sent, and five sinister shapes immediately emerged from the sand around the Heresiarch as the Spectres moved in.

The Specters didn't hesitate. Their orders were simple : using their grave-mist to covering their moves, get close to the target and use their special ability to phase into the Heresiarch and then forcefully rematerialize, hopefully tearing him to shreds from the inside.

It didn't work. Uger saw it in details, his senses more than capable of piercing the Specters' mist. The Heresiarch slammed his staff into the sand, and tendrils of blackness erupted from his feet, wrapping around the Specters' immaterial forms and arresting them in their tracks.

Uger didn't hesitate. Moving on instinct, he unleashed his own ultimate attack, plunging toward the Heresiarch in a tornado of bladed wings. The Heresiarch reacted incredibly fast, but even his hastily-erected shield couldn't protect him completely from Uger's attack, which shredded his robe and tore at the dried meat underneath.

It wasn't much damage – the Heresiarch's body was a lot tougher than Uger had expected – but the attack did manage to distract him long enough for the Specters to break free and vanish back into the sand. Uger flew up, but before he could get away, the Heresiarch fired another black beam straight at him.

The attack burned half of Uger's wings off, and would have taken his head off if he hadn't moved at the last moment. He fell on the sand, agony flaring through his enhanced senses even as he could feel his regeneration start to attend to the damage. Before he could recover his wits, something kicked him in the chest, hard, and he fell back, finding himself pinned down with the Heresiarch glaring down at him.

"I am going to eat your soul," hissed the undead horror. "From it, I will learn the names and faces of all your loved ones, and then I will go after them too."

Uger wished he had a mouth in this form, just so he could spit in the monster's face. He settled for trying to headbutt him instead, but his grip was too strong, despite Uger weighing at least three times the weight of the bag of bones, dessicated organs and overly ornate robes atop him.

Holding Uger down with the butt of his staff, the Heresiarch slowly knelt, bringing his free hand close to Uger's skull. The Captain could feel the vile energies gathering around it, and remembered the hysterical tale of the two Albish explorers they'd rescued describing how the undead monster had ripped the life and soul of one of their guards from his flesh.

As he stared death in the face, Uger's thoughts did not, to his own surprise, turn to his wife and daughter. Instead, all he could think of was a desperate hope, a prayer, that someone would stop the monster atop him – that his death wouldn't mean the defeat of the Imperial Army here, and that the people of Kheriaha would be protected.

Then, suddenly, there was a gust of wind, the sound of a violent impact, and the weight atop him vanished.

---

*"The main unknown the ISE's leadership faced was that nobody knew what the Heresiarch was capable of. The testimonies of the two Albish witnesses was short on details, but the Director made it clear during her conversation with the ISE commanders that his elimination must be considered the top priority of the battle.*

*During the Defense of Kheriaha, most of the ISE's aerial mages were tasked with observing the battle as best they could despite the storm, and most importantly, immediately report the*

*moment they detected the use of mana (as the sandstorm and the speed at which the ISE had travelled had made the delicate detection equipment unusable for the moment).*

*The plan to use the Specters to take him out rather than have them join the melee was thought to have a high chance of success (the Director having claimed that she herself could very well be taken out by such a surprise attack under the right circumstances, and the Heresiarch hadn't shown himself capable of flight at that point).*

*Nevertheless, it wasn't the only plan made to deal with the enemy commander. At the very end of the list was the use of the doses of Endlose Nacht entrusted to Colonel Lergen for safekeeping : much as he had on the Rhine Front, the Colonel had been given the authorization to call the Untoten back and have them use the serum if he judged the situation warranted it.*

*The next plan after the Spectre-type Werwölfe was to use a combination of the assets from Division Y accompanying the ISE in a way that had never been tested on the battlefield before. As soon as General Romel received confirmation that the Heresiarch had joined the fray, Colonel Lergen gave the order to the occultists under his command to begin the last phase of the Ritual of Correspondence.*

*More details on the Ritual of Correspondence can be found in file 420-BX-9, but for the sake of this report, we will go over the basics. Cast by a number of magic users at the same time, the Ritual of Correspondence enables what can be best summed up as a sharing of mana pools, granting one specific member of the ritual access to the mana reserves of all the others for the duration of the ritual. During testing, it was found that the ritual link can be reliably maintained for a maximum of five minutes once the recipient leaves the ritual circle, although this requires intense concentration from all the other participants.*

*Fortunately, the ability to focus under pressure is a skill possessed by all occultists of Division Y ..."*

---

*October 7th, 1925 – Outskirts of Kheriaha*

As he fought with the Heresiarch, some part of Weiss' mind was distantly aware that this couldn't possibly be good for his health.

His D-24 computation orb was embedded within his artificial right arm, right where Professor Gehrman had left an indentation in its surface for that express purpose. Weiss hadn't used that feature in actual combat before – you had to keep your trump cards hidden until you needed them, after all. Mana flowed a lot better through the strange material of Projekt P than it did through his own flesh, letting him manipulate mana with greater precision.

In addition to the Ritual of Correspondence boosting his mana output, the Captain was also using a mental doping spell to maximum strength. Rage, guilt and horror : all were sublimated into a state of perfect clarity. Was this how the Major always saw the world ?

He felt the Heresiarch gather mana, and immediately let go, sending his enemy crashing into the sand with little grace while he brutally reverted his own flight to land a few meters behind him. Around them, the Fiends recoiled, hissing and growling like the beasts they were as the two mages faced one another.

"I am the Heresiarch," hissed the undead monstrosity in accented Albish. "First of the Black Pharaoh's servants. Herald of the glory that is to come !"

"I am the champion of the Lady of Stars," Weiss declared in the same language. He wanted that thing to understand him before he killed him. "And I am your end."

With those words, he activated his mage blade, calling it into existence at the end of his artificial arm. Usually, a mage blade was colorless, being made up of raw mana. This one, however, was a shard of moonlight, shining brightly amidst the shadows cast by the sandstorm overhead.

Seeing this, the Heresiarch snarled, and a blade of black and red magical energy burst from the mouth of his staff's serpent head. For a few more seconds, they stared at one another – then Weiss moved.

His first blow, aimed at the Heresiarch's neck, was parried at the last moment, and then the two of them were locked in a lethal dance. Weiss was not a trained swordsman, and he doubted there was any fencing school in the Empire that taught its students to fight against what he guessed could best be described as a scythe. But he was an Imperial soldier, trained in close quarter combat, with his skills sharpened by long weeks spent enduring what the Major called training and everyone else called hell. With his reflexes pushed far beyond their limits by his mental doping and his body boosted even further, he fought less like a man and more like a demigod of old myth.

The two magic blades clashed again and again, each collision sending out arcs of energy that turned patches of sand to melted glass. Particles of sand lifted by the wind were also turned to crystal, creating strange web-like structures around the two combatants that immediately shattered under the pull of gravity.

Never had Weiss been so close to death; never had he felt more alive.

With a shriek of rage, the Heresiarch brought up his left hand, shrouded in black fire. Weiss disengaged and moved backward, not so much jumping as flying at high speeds with his feet just a few centimeters above the sand. The fiery claw passed right in front of his face, and he immediately reverted his motion before lashing out with his mage blade, hitting the offending appendage at the wrist and severing it in one blow. Something cracked inside him at the brutal motion, but he didn't feel any pain (for now).

For the briefest instant, the Heresiarch froze, gazing at the stump of his wrist with empty eye sockets. Without thinking, Weiss moved in. He grabbed the undead's staff and yanked it aside with his left hand, resulting in the Heresiarch's sudden conversion of his mage blade into another beam attack going wide and turning a long stretch of sand into black glass. Then, in the same motion, he plunged his moonlight blade up through the Heresiarch's dessicated torso with enough strength to lift him up in the air.

Slowly, the Heresiarch raised his skull to stare at Weiss, his jaw moving wordlessly, the stench of his breath nearly enough to break Weiss' focus.

"This is the twentieth century, you bastard," Weiss told him. "There's no place for monsters like you here."

"Master," the Heresiarch whispered. "Why have you forsaken me ?"

Without answering, Weiss cast an explosion formula through his mage blade, activating it right at the base of the Heresiarch's skull. The ancient head disappeared in a shower of fire and bone shrapnel that pinged against Weiss' shield, and the rest of the body almost immediately turned to dust, falling at Weiss' feet and mixing with the sand as time finally caught up with it.

As he dispelled his physical enhancement spell, his right arm crumbled and fell apart, the burned-out, melted remains of his D-24 glittering amidst the debris. Swaying on his feet, Weiss managed to stay up long enough to raise his left arm, the one that hadn't gotten devoured by a nightmarish horror from the darkest reaches of the cosmos, into the air, toward the heavens where he hoped the people he hadn't been able to save watched over this battle. Spots danced in his vision, competing with the darkness that crept in at the edge of his sight.

"You … are … avenged," he muttered, forcing the words out. Then he fell straight down, face first in the sand, exhaustion and pain finally overcoming him.

---

*"Though the destruction of the Heresiarch by Captain Weiss guaranteed the ISE's victory, the battle still raged on for several hours afterwards. Soon, however, the genuine struggle turned into a hunt for surviving Fiends, to ensure that none of them escaped to blight Kemet with their presence. As the sandstorm died down, General Romel was able to use artillery to crush the greatest pockets of Fiends, while the ISE's flyers kept watch for any enemy elements trying to run. Unlike what would have happened in a conventional engagement by that point, the Defense of Kheriaha saw no quarter offered to the foe.*

*The Defense of Kheriaha was a success, but not one without casualties. Several instances of Projekt W were slain, many more injured beyond their ability to recover swiftly from. Despite the efforts to keep the Fiends at bay, the unaugmented soldiers also paid a heavy toll, with several hundreds dead and many more injured.*

*As the dust and sand settled, General Romel ordered his exhausted troops to quickly gather the corpses of their slain foes, now returning to their human forms. The people and nominal defenders of Kemet's capital had so far remained within the city itself, but now that the battle was over, it was feared they would come to investigate, and perhaps take advantage of the ISE's perceived weakness. To prevent them from witnessing the human-seeming corpses of the Fiends, they were promptly incinerated with mage fire, hot enough to turn even bones to ash.*

*Victory had been achieved, but it remained to be seen if the ISE's objectives on the Southern Continent would be accomplished ..."*

Chapter End Notes

AN : You've got to have some magic fights in a YS story, after all. Also, not going to lie, the site of the duel between Weiss and the Heresiarch is probably going to end up as a tourist trap a few decades in the future.

Just to be clear, every italicized section without a source at the end comes from the first document. I thought using that framing device would allow you to get a clear picture of the battle's progression without needing to use an omniscient third person perspective, since I haven't used one so far in the story. Although I suppose Uger's POV isn't that far from that, given the perception abilities of a Whisper.

For the calculations and reasoning that led to the timeline of events in this chapter (specifically the speed of the two armies) check out page 179 of the SB thread. Initially, there was another scene in this chapter, but I ended up cutting it and moving it to the next chapter - I felt it flowed better that way. As a result, I expect next chapter to be a breeze to write, since it'll be mostly the fallout of this chapter and foreshadowing for what comes next.

As always, I look forward to your comments, thoughts, and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*IMPERIAL ARMY DEFENDS CAPITAL FROM CHIMERIC ABOMINATIONS*

*Yesterday, all Kheriahans knew that something terrible was happening. For days, we had all heard word of the unnatural sandstorm moving east toward the city, completely out of nowhere. As the storm approached, official instructions were to seek shelter and not go outside until the storm passed.*

*At the same time, and as we reported in this paper, the Imperial forces which defeated the Allied Kingdom's troops at Al-Alamein suddenly stopped their advance toward Arigzandria and moved south at all speed, appearing to be racing against the storm itself to reach Kheriaha first. To the shock of many, the Kingdom's garrison in Arigzandria didn't move to intercept them. The reasons for this lack of action are still unclear, although given the poor showing of Albion's soldiers at Al-Alamein a certain level of speculation cannot be helped.*

*Despite initial fears, the Imperial Army didn't move to occupy Kheriaha upon reaching the capital, something which it could easily have accomplished given its strength compared to the troops defending the city. Instead, they began setting up defensive positions directly in the path of the storm, while advising the population to evacuate the districts located directly behind their positions. An Imperial delegation was sent to the Royal Palace, but no information is available at this time as to what words the Imperial envoys exchanged with His Majesty.*

*Then the storm hit, and the truth was revealed. It wasn't just the winds, however harsh, that the Imperial Army had come to fight, but that which walked alongside the storm : hundreds of grotesque monsters, monstrous fusions of animal and man driven only by the desire for murder. The pictures accompanying this article (which I do not recommend for the faint of heart) were taken in the last hours of the battle, after the sandstorm had abated with the same impossible speed with which it had formed in the first place. According to the Imperial soldiers we were able to interview, these attackers slaughtered one of the nomadic tribes of the desert that had the misfortune of crossing their way. They also vehemently insisted that the Empire wasn't to blame for the monsters' presence.*

*Our sources within the Kingdom's forces stationed in our country have told us that unconfirmed rumors indeed blame the sudden appearance of these monsters not on the Empire's Wunderwaffen, but on the Allied Kingdom's own operatives. To this reporter, such rumors make a disturbing amount of sense : it will be obvious to even the least informed of our readers that the Allied Kingdom, along with every other major power on the planet, has been trying to catch up to the Empire's superweapons. But such research must surely be dangerous, especially when performed during wartime, as opposed to the no doubt much more careful and slow pace the Empire used while building its arsenal.*

*With that danger combined with the need for secrecy, where else would the Allied Kingdom have located its research facilities but in our very own Bardad Desert ? Not only would their mages and scientists be hidden by hundreds of kilometers of sand, but even should things go wrong, as they obviously did, it would not be their precious Albion that would be in danger but Kemet instead.*

*Fortunately for us all, the Empire was better prepared to handle such a crisis than our colonial overlords. Of course, a cynical mind might argue that the Imperial Army's motives in rushing to the defense of Kheriaha weren't purely altruistic, and I do not doubt for a moment that strategic calculations played a part in their decision. But this does not diminish the courage of the brave Imperial soldiers who held the line against the horrors that came from the desert under the cover of that great sandstorm ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Word of Kheriaha, a Kemetian newspaper with known anti-Allied Kingdom tendencies, October 8th, 1925.

---

*"... the gateway itself appears to be a class-VI dimensional breach, kept stable by the archway to which it is anchored. Unlike the accidental breaches that sometimes manifest during Elder research, this one appears to have been deliberate and, for lack of better terms, controlled and aimed. It is our belief that the individual(s) who created it had previous experience with the location on the other side, perhaps having discovered it during earlier experimentation.*

*As on Nazza-Duhni, time does not appear to work properly within the Nameless City. Timepieces and any mechanical device more elaborate than the level of technology one would expect from the Ancient Kemetians inevitably break down, with the sole exception being the D-24 computation orb. Using those, we have taken records of the city as well as of the black sun that shines its eldritch light upon it. The black sun in question is completely immobile within the skies of the Nameless City, and its true nature eludes us as of the time of writing.*

*While most of the bones in the immediate surroundings belong to humans, others clearly do not, which contradicts with the return to human shape observed on Fiend corpses. The sheer number and damaged state of bones make reassembling full skeletons a difficult task, but there are two possibilities that we can think of. One is that the Nameless City was home to other inhuman creatures who did not survive the battle and subsequent millennia (perhaps having been devoured by the Fiend population before it turned on itself, leading to the Heresiarch petrifying them). The second is that, within the Nameless City, dead Fiends do not revert to a human form for one reason or another. Without living specimens, however, we cannot verify that hypothesis.*

*The Nameless City mostly follows construction styles of Ancient Kemet, albeit at a greater scale and using materials native to this realm. A quick survey by aerial mages showed that the black sands surrounding the city stretch out infinitely, with a total absence of curvature to the horizon suggesting that this is an entirely flat plane, or a planet so vast as to appear so to our casual observation.*

*Several artefacts of historical interest have been recovered from the devastated buildings, but access to the central pyramid was forbidden by Colonel Lergen …"*

Excerpt from the analysis report of the Division Y occultists assigned to the Imperial Southern Expedition regarding the gateway to the Nameless City, October 10th, 1925.

---

*October 12th, 1925 – Bardad Desert – Ancient Kemetian Settlement*

The area was in a very different state than the last time Niniane had seen it. None of the buildings were still standing, and the pillars around the area had been toppled and covered in claw marks.

"I take it this wasn't like that when you found it ?" asked the Imperial captain escorting them as he noticed their reaction.

"No," said Carnahan, sounding like he was grieving. "It was perfectly intact, preserved across the ages …"

"Well, it was like that when we arrived," said the captain. "It seems the Heresiarch didn't agree with the decor. Follow me, please."

They obeyed – as if they had a choice. Since they had been rescued from the monsters of the Nameless City, the two Albish operatives had been kept under tight guard. They hadn't been mistreated, but they hadn't been given any opportunity to escape, and had been kept apart until this morning, when they'd both been put into an Imperial vehicle equipped for desert travel – some kind of weird prototype designed in an Imperial military research lab that the Allied Kingdom's intelligence would probably love hearing about, unless Niniane missed her guess – and driven back to the place where this whole mess had started.

Tents had been erected around the ruins, Imperial soldiers and scientists moving around with purpose, taking samples and examining them, while also keeping a sharp eye out for any threat. Niniane had expected their approach to be questioned, but every Imperial soldier didn't give them a second glance after seeing the captain escorting them.

They were brought to a tent set up atop a dune overlooking the entire complex, with a clear view of the central building, which could easily be identified by the gateway which was the only part of it left intact, the portal to the Nameless City gleaming malevolently in the afternoon sun. Niniane was grateful for the shade, and even more grateful for the water canteen their escort presented to her and Carnahan.

A man in an Imperial officer's uniform was standing in the shade with his back turned to them, smoke rising from a cigarette held idly in his right hand. There was a small table next to him with a couple of boxes on it, and a larger one with a map of the region pinned down, but the four of them were alone.

"Colonel," said their guide with a salute after he'd let them quench their thirst. "I have brought you the captives as requested."

The colonel took a few puffs on his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke, then turned to face them. He was young for someone of his rank, though he was made to look older by an expression of simmering anger that lined his face and worried Niniane. A pair of sharp, intelligent eyes looked at the two Albish from being a pair of glasses.

"Thank you, Captain Uger."

'Uger'. That was the name the Imperial mage who had rescued them had used when he had addressed the flying monster. Was it a coincidence ? The thought that they might very well have been in the company of that insectoid monstrosity all that time sent a shiver down Niniane's spine despite the oppressive heat. But more importantly, she recognized the face of the colonel in front of her.

"You know who I am," he said conversationally, as if he'd expected as much. He spoke in clear Albish, though he didn't even try to hide his Imperial accent.

"You are Colonel Lergen," said Niniane. There was no point in hiding it. "The architect of Division Y."

Next to her, she heard Carnahan gasp. The archaeology professor hadn't known, of course – there had been no reason to brief what was essentially a civilian contractor on the full extent of the Allied Kingdom's knowledge of the Empire's workings. He looked at their captor with renewed fear, now aware that there stood the man who, as far as the Allied Kingdom knew, was the source of the Empire's crushing victories in the Great War and the complete upheaval of the balance of power in Europa.

The colonel chuckled. "You give me too much credit. All I did was help the right people be at the place I thought their talents could best be used. But yes, I am indeed Colonel Eric von Lergen of the Imperial Army. And you are Professor Henry Carnahan of the Royal College, and Miss … Niniane, was it ? I see Albion's sense of humor hasn't improved since they thought it would be a fine jape to join a war just as it was about to finally end. The Empire is just as fond of mythological naming as any power, but that seems a little on the nose even then."

Despite everything, Niniane couldn't stop herself from flushing. It wasn't as if she had chosen that codename when she had joined the ranks of the Royal Wizard's apprentices ! The pool of codenames was defined by traditions going back hundreds of years, and those available to women were few and far between. At least Niniane was better than Guinevere or, God forbid, Morgana.

"In any case," continued Lergen, "I'm sure the two of you are wondering why you are here."

"The question has crossed our minds, yes," replied Niniane, trying to keep any sarcasm out of her voice. Now wasn't the time for wit, at least not while there was still a chance of making it out alive.

"To begin with, his Majesty the King of Kemet isn't happy with you. His people watched the battle, and we showed him the recording of your interrogations. He knows it was his Albish

'friends' who let loose that ancient evil upon his country, and he knows who saved his capital."

Oh, that wasn't good. No, it was a god-damned disaster. The Allied Kingdom needed Kemet; most importantly, it needed the Suan Canal, both for trade and to bring in the troops raised in the Eastern colonies.

"Of course," continued Lergen, "his Majesty is all too aware of the disparity between what pitiful forces your country allows him to keep and the might of Albion's armies. So your masters won't have to worry about a colonial revolt … for now." The colonel gestured to the water canteen on the table where Captain Uger had put it down. "But a king's gratitude at least extends to providing food, water and fuel to the Imperial Southern Expedition at bargain prices. And when the time comes, as it must, for guns to fall silent and diplomats to speak in their stead, well. Certain concessions will be expected."

It was a cunning move by the local king, Niniane had to admit. He couldn't exactly be blamed for giving basic supplies to the Imperial Army, not when it was parked right next to his capital with an awful lot of firepower and the Allied Kingdom's army having completely failed to stop it.

Although the Allied Kingdom had granted independence to Kemet a few decades back, everyone knew it wasn't as simple as that. The King of Kemet could rule his country as he saw fit, but when it came to international matters, he was still very much expected to follow Albion's lead, in exchange for the protection of their army and navy to enforce his borders and reign. Niniane was aware that many Kemetians saw this as little better than vassalization, especially since the Suan Canal, which allowed direct passage from the Eastern Sea to the Inner Sea, was still under the control of the Allied Kingdom, despite being located in Kemetian territory.

By establishing favorable ties with the Empire, the King of Kemet could expect that, if the Empire ended the Great War in a dominant position, it would put pressure on the Allied Kingdom to withdraw its military presence from the region, allowing Kemet to truly be independent once more. She had heard it said that the Empire considered war to be the continuation of politics by other means (or, more glibly, that the reverse was true), but this was a masterful move in the Great Game, and one that her own actions had made possible.

"Why are you telling us all of this ?" she asked.

"Because I want you to understand the situation here. I want you to understand the magnitude of your fuck-up."

The sudden swear from the calm and collected officer caught Niniane off-guard. Lergen continued as if nothing had happened :

"I want you to realize just how close your actions came to condemning hundreds of thousands of people to a fate worse than death, so that when I send you back to your miserable little island, you understand what is at stake."

Despite the shade the tent provided, the temperature was still well above what Niniane was comfortable with. Yet now, as Lergen stared at her without ever raising his voice, it felt as if it had dropped several degrees below freezing temperature.

"Right now, there are six children in a hospital who have lost their entire families to the monsters that came out of that gate. They don't even have bones to bury, but they do have the memories of their dying screams, and all our efforts to ensure they're taken care of won't change that. And in the Empire, there are hundreds of children who will never see their father again, because they died in defense of Kheriaha."

"And the worst part," hissed the Imperial Colonel, "is that despite all of that, this is still as close to the best possible result of you breaking the seal over this place as we were likely to get. If we hadn't been able to stop the Heresiarch in time, by now Kheriaha would be either a graveyard or worse : a spawning ground for hundreds of thousands of Fiends, all of them serving the Heresiarch and hungering for human flesh. The entire region would have become a slaughterhouse."

Lergen's words echoed the nightmares that had plagued Niniane since her escape from the Nameless City. Though she hadn't been kept informed of the evolving situation, she had picked up bits and pieces from the conversations of their jailers : she knew that the Imperial Army had rushed to Kheriaha, and that a great battle had been fought there against the Heresiarch and his horde of once-petrified monsters (which it seemed the Imperials called Fiends, a fitting name in her opinion).

She was the one who had awakened the Heresiarch from his slumber. She was the one who had led the rest of their team to their deaths. Carnahan had been there too, yes, but he had deferred to her authority, and he was an archaeologist, not a mage. It was Niniane who had pushed for them to continue, driven to fulfill her master's orders and secure the means by which the Allied Kingdom could defend itself from the Empire.

Instead, she had barely escaped with her life, ended up being rescued by the Empire, and had almost spelled the doom of Kemet. Every time she closed her eyes and tried to sleep, she was haunted by her imagination conjuring nightmares of the Nameless City's horrors rampaging through the crowded streets of the Kemetian capital. Guilt and shock haunted her, and it was only through a considerable effort of will that she had kept herself from completely falling apart.

"So far, the Empire has refrained from taking hostile action against the Allied Kingdom, apart from that little incident at Londinium that brought us both here."

"What about the ships your commerce raiders sunk ?" asked Niniane before she could stop herself. "Or does the Empire not consider that 'hostile action' ?"

The look she saw Carnahan give her from the corner of her eyes told her what the older man thought about contradicting their captors, but she couldn't let that sort of thing go unchallenged. Albion's behavior in this war was far from unimpeachable, yes, but that didn't mean the Empire was saintly either.

However, Lergen didn't appear troubled by her accusations. If anything, he looked amused by them.

"Yes, I have read those claims in your newspapers. Strange how none of the names of the ships they mention as having been sunk by our submarines show up anywhere in the listings of our ports or the ones we've seized, or as being in completely different regions of the globe. It's almost as if somebody was trying to blame the Empire for a decrease in trade caused by, say, the Francois Republic no longer being willing to deal with Albion."

"You're lying," Niniane managed to say. He had to be.

"No, I am not," he immediately refuted, before adding : "I may still be wrong, of course. What I just told you might be the Empire's own propaganda, a cover for the actions of some over-zealous submarine captain. Despite my position, I am not aware of everything going on within the Imperial bureaucracy. But, well. We aren't the ones who sent a bunch of mages on an assassination mission without declaring war. Or the ones who sank a fleet belonging to their own allies. Or the ones who performed Elder sorcery research in a colony with only the most bare bones of personnel and no security measures to speak of, nearly resulting in the deaths of millions."

The rebuke, however politely delivered, forced Niniane to silence.

"I want to make it clear, again, that the two of you are not solely to blame for this disaster. But I intend for you to carry a message back to Londinium, and it is time to show you how seriously the Empire takes such things."

The colonel opened one of the boxes on the table and took out a small cylinder with a button on one end. He glanced at the captain, still standing in one corner of the tent, who nodded shortly.

"Thousands of years ago," began Lergen, "when the Ancient Kemetians built this stronghold to guard against a resurgence of the Nameless City, they had limited tools at their disposal. That they managed to erect a seal that lasted this long is impressive and worthy of praise. But things have changed since then, and we do not need to contend ourselves with merely plugging that hole and keeping an eye on it anymore."

With his back still turned to the ruins, the colonel pressed the button. One second later, a massive explosion erupted from the ruined fortress. Pieces of stone the size of a man went flying, before bouncing on a magic shield suddenly englobing the site of the detonation. The Imperials had been ready for this, Niniane realized, with mages keeping up a shield to contain the explosion that she hadn't been able to detect due to her distraction.

"Captain Uger, report," said Lergen, still utterly calm.

"It's gone, sir," replied the man who might not be a man at all, staring at the cloud of dust roiling within the shield as if it were no obstacle to his sight at all. "The breach is closed."

"Good. That's one less loose end."

"You … you destroyed it ?" It was Carnahan who spoke, sounding halfway between relieved and appalled.

"Of course. Division Y makes its own weapons. The Empire learns from the past, it does not plunder it for sharp sticks and shiny toys." Lergen sighed. "Also, we do not plan to stay in this country forever. At some point we will have to leave, and clearly we cannot trust the Allied Kingdom not to do something stupid if we'd just left the gate intact." Behind his glasses, his gaze seemed to pierce through Niniane's face and into her very soul. "Can you honestly tell me that if the Allied Kingdom learned how to create the kind of monsters you unleashed, they wouldn't do it ?"

She wanted to scream. She wanted to shout, to tell him that yes, of course she could, of course the Allied Kingdom would never stoop so low. That it was the Empire who had made monsters and used them for war, and that all the Kingdom wanted was the means to protect itself.

But she couldn't, because for all her faults, Niniane wasn't a fool, and she refused to lie to herself. So she said nothing.

Lergen chuckled humourlessly at her silence. He opened the second box on the table, and tossed it in her direction.

"This is yours, I believe."

Niniane just managed to catch it, before freezing in place when she realized what it was. It was a small silver cross, the very relic entrusted to her by the Royal Wizard, which had allowed her to ward off the Heresiarch in the black pyramid and which her captors had taken from her after their escape from the Fiends.

Why ? Why had he handed her a magical tool ? He knew she was a mage, knew that she could use that relic to cast spells. This was the equivalent of giving her, a prisoner in the middle of an enemy camp, a fully loaded shotgun. She could use it to attack him, even if doing so would be suicide in the long run, especially if her suspicions about Captain Uger were right. Why would he …

A cold shiver ran down her spine as she realized the truth. Lergen had given the relic back to her because to him, it made no difference whether she had it or not : she was still completely harmless. She couldn't sense any mana from him, even from so close a distance, and the Kingdom's investigation hadn't found any trace that he possessed even a sliver of magical talent. But this was the man who had faced Colonel Drake without fear, who commanded the respect of Division Y's creatures and destroyed ancient, priceless artefacts without hesitation.

Who knew what he was capable of if she made any hostile move ? By giving it back to her, he was making a statement that not only did he have nothing to fear from her, the Empire itself had no need for such a trinket – despite it being a priceless, irreplaceable relic.

“I don’t know if your masters will listen to anything I said,” Lergen continued. “They are not the ones paying the price for war, after all : just the ones who get to declare it. But I want you to make sure they know this : it doesn’t matter how wealthy, influential, or powerful they are.

If the lords of Albion set the world aflame with their greed and ambition, they will pay the price. No matter where they hide, we will find them before the end, even if I have to personally swim to your wretched island to drag them out of their holes and shoot them myself."

There was a moment of silence as he looked at them, his gaze pinning them in place as they digested his words.

"That will be all," Lergen said. "Captain Uger, please escort our guests back to Kheriaha. Leave them in front of the Allied Kingdom's embassy; I expect they'll be able to find their way home from there."

"Yes, sir," the man – who Niniane was now all but certain was the winged horror she'd seen during their desperate flight from the Nameless City – replied with a sharp salute.

"Goodbye, Miss Niniane, Professor Carnahan. I hope that if we ever meet again, it will be under more peaceful circumstances, and not because we have to, say, burn Londinium to the ground because your masters accidentally summoned a dark god back into the world."

"Y-yes. I hope the same. Goodbye."

*Eric von Lergen,* Niniane thought as she and Carnahan were returned to the vehicle that'd brought them here in the first place, too shaken to do anything but meekly follow. *What a dangerous man ...*

---

*October 13th, 1925 – Castle Schwartzstein*

I looked at the reports on my desk, sent by the team assigned to the Imperial Southern Expedition, and sighed. Despite the losses taken in defending Kheriaha, and for which I had already written the death notices to the families of the dead along with the paperwork for posthumous promotions, commendations, and (most importantly) the relevant increases in the pensions owed by the Empire, things had gone a lot better than we had any right to expect. When I had heard that the Albish had managed to rouse an ancient Kemetian not-mummy from his slumber, I had expected the worse.

It was one thing for stuff like that to happen in movies, where a band of plucky heroes were sure to put the evil sorcerer back into his sarcophagus by the time the credit rolled, but reality was another matter entirely. I couldn't be certain what impact the conquest of Kemet by an ancient warlock and his army of flesh-eating monsters would have had on the global geopolitical stage, but somehow I doubted it would've favored the Empire. No, moving the ISE in order to deal with the situation had been the right move. Besides, all strategic and political considerations aside, I doubted many soldiers would've been happy to sit on their backsides and do nothing while civilians were slaughtered in their thousands.

Apart from being revolting from a humanitarian point of view, being denied a fight wasn't the sort of thing that pleased the kind of war maniacs that seemed to populate the Imperial Army.

Part of me wanted to scream at Weiss for claiming to be the champion of the Lady of Stars during his fight with the Heresiarch. Even if he had said it way behind enemy lines, Uger had still picked it up, and that tidbit had apparently spread through the troops like wildfire, meaning I would never be free of that ridiculous title if anyone outside of Division Y ever made the connection with me. But for one thing, he had just won a battle against a Mythos undead sorcerer at great personal risk, and for another, he had said it while under the effect of a boosted mental doping spell. Much like being drunk, the latter wasn't a fool-proof excuse, but it did buy you some degree of latitude when it came to saying stupid things. I would have to content myself with making sure his training following his recovery was just that little bit more intense, since he'd proven beyond doubt that he could handle it.

Aside from that, I also had to deal with the aftermath of our first prepared battle against a Mythos-empowered force, and the lessons to be drawn from the engagement. General Romel had asked about the possibility of getting more M-912s for troops outside of Division Y, as well as bigger versions of the energy guns, since those were the only way available for standard soldiers to stand up to Mythos entities (at least when there was a storm preventing aerial or artillery bombing).

Diversifying the derivatives of Projekt Mjölnir made sense, so I had forwarded his request to the researchers of Projekt M with instructions to write a proposal, an estimated budget, and suggested safety measures to deal with the strange resonance that happened when several M-912s were brought in close proximity, for me to look at later.

From what the preliminary dissection of the Fiend corpses had found out, while they had returned to a human appearance after death, it was very much only an appearance. DNA sequencing wasn't a thing yet, and wouldn't be for a few more decades if I remembered correctly, but just looking at the blood of the Fiends under an optic magnification spell (equivalent to a microscope, but much less fragile when walking on campaign) had revealed that whatever the Fiends' corpses might look like, they weren't humans, unlike our Werwölfe. Looking at the notes we'd copied from Professor Carnahan's rubbings and those bits that had survived the Heresiarch's tantrum, it seemed that, during the war against the Heresiarch and his master, Fiends had been created from captured enemy soldiers and civilians. Which meant there had to be at least some degree of brainwashing involved, since otherwise you would expect the newly-transformed Fiends to turn against their tormentors instead of following their commands.

Combined with the instinctive hatred of the instances of Projekt W and the fact that, oh yeah, they had *eaten people and each other*, and it would be a scorching day in Antarctica before I approved of any research into making our own Fiends, even if we had found the means to do so in the Nameless City. The Werwölfe were just better in every single way, and I wasn't going to risk having them mutiny just to get access to their dollar-store, walking-war-crime equivalent.

We could likely have learned much from the Nameless City, but Colonel Lergen had decided the risk of it falling back into enemy hands was too great. Much as it had disappointed the crazed researchers working on Projekt S, I had agreed with his judgement on that one. I had been equally relieved when I'd been informed he'd expressly forbidden any incursion within the black pyramid where the Albish explorers had awakened the Heresiarch. It was unlikely

there was another undead sorcerer slumbering within it, yes, but unlikely didn't mean impossible. Maybe the Heresiarch had rivals in the court of his 'Black Pharaoh' and hadn't wanted to share command of what remained of his army with them. Irrational, yes, but then his brains had literally rotten thousands of years before Weiss annihilated what remained of them with his explosion formula.

The Black Pharaoh … now there was another reason to worry, as if I needed a new one these days. The Heresiarch had used that term twice : once when he'd woken up and talked with the Albish, and another when he had faced Weiss. My best hope was that this was just a title bestowed upon that 'Nameless One' mentioned in the hieroglyphs around the gateway. In my old world, at least, the ancient Egyptians had erased the names of their most despised criminals, for religious reasons if I remembered correctly. Some ancient wizard discovering the Mythos and using it to raise an army of monsters certainly would qualify.

And yet, I couldn't help thinking I was deluding myself by clinging to that hope. Because there had been another being called the Black Pharaoh in the Cthulhu Mythos. By now, I was certain that whatever was going on behind the scenes wasn't exactly like the cosmic horror setting Lovecraft had introduced to my old world, but Division Y's research had uncovered far too many similarities for my peace of mind. So far, the most likely scenario was that Being X had engineered the Black Pharaoh's rise thousands of years ago, waited for a few years while he ravaged Kemet, then granted blessings to his enemies so that they could fight back and defeat him, thus increasing faith in the divine (just like I suspected he was trying to do with me and the Empire, except we were proving more resilient than he had expected). Of course, that theory implied that the Ancient Kemetian pantheon had just been another of his masks, which wasn't great news.

Oh well. Maybe we'd be able to learn more from the Heresiarch's staff, which was securely in the possession of Division Y's assets on the Southern Continent and would be brought back to Castle Schwartzstein for deeper study as soon as possible.

On another, more optimistic note, Colonel Lergen was playing his part as commander of Division Y's forces exceptionally well, although I was worried he might be getting too 'into character', so to speak. One of the last things I needed was for one of the few reasonable and Mythos-aware people in the General Staff to get caught up in the enthusiasm born of witnessing the awesome power of the Wunderwaffen at work, or in understandable anger at the Allied Kingdom's blunders.

Now that the threat of the Nameless City had been dealt with, the Imperial Army was ready to continue with its official mission. With the Allied Kingdom's troops holed up in Arigzandria and understandably not in a hurry to face the Wunderwaffen themselves, crossing the Nile and reaching Suan shouldn't be too difficult. And once the Empire had an army stationed next to the Canal, hopefully the Kingdom would see sense and accept to start negotiating. Having had their troops crushed at Al-Alamein and the fuck-up of their expedition almost resulting in Kheriaha being overrun by flesh-eating monsters should've also taught them a lesson or two.

If the Kingdom was rational, then the threat to their economy the ISE sitting next to the Suan Canal alone should be enough to get them to stop. General Romel wouldn't even need the

support of Division Y to blockade the Canal if he chose to : artillery pieces and aerial mages were more than capable of sinking any civilian ship trying to cross it while flying an Albish flag.

General Romel was under very strict instructions not to blow up the Suan Canal under any circumstances (except for those detailed in a sealed letter I'd written for him, which basically amounted to 'either we blow up the Canal or the Inner Sea gets overrun with giant sea monsters because someone messed up very badly'). It was a very important piece of infrastructure, vital to trade for all of Europa and beyond : actually destroying it would make a lot of people very angry at us. We didn't need that right now, or ever if I had anything to say about it. That being said, there were lots of things the Imperial Southern Expedition could do short of completely blocking the Canal to mess with the Allied Kingdom, and the John Bulls knew it.

Unfortunately, regardless of what the rest of Central Headquarters might think, Brigadier General Zettour and I were all too aware that nobody else on this planet seemed to be as rational as us, and the sunk cost fallacy coupled with them having gotten the means to protect their homeland from our Wunderwaffen might be enough to make them continue fighting. Or, more appropriately, continue making their soldiers and colonial recruits fight and die while the ones making the decisions stayed safe in Londinium. I had read about the callous disregard for the lives of their soldiers of the First World War's generals back in my old world, but it was another thing entirely to live through such a staggering waste of human resources myself.

But if Albion decided to be unreasonable, well. That was what Operation Enigma was for. As Director of Division Y, the preparations for it were but one of the many demands on my time, however, so I returned my attention to the paperwork piled up on my desk.

The next piece of paper was a welcome piece of good news : a message from Iosefka informing me that Colonel Sue's recovery was going along nicely. The Legadonian mage could get out of bed on his own and walk for a few moments before needing to get back to rest. She wanted to keep him under observation for another week, just to be sure, but after that she expected to clear him to be sent to live with the rest of his men for the remainder of his recovery, with the medical personnel handling the captives enough to deal with his rehabilitation and any emergencies not taken care of by her regular visits. His wife and daughter would be delighted : the camp was much closer to the village where they had been relocated after their hasty departure from Legadonia. Maybe Grantz would be disappointed to have less chances to see Mary, but then if he was serious he should put in some effort himself.

Next was a report on the Nazzadi who had asked to be taught how to fly. They were learning the advanced mathematics required for the job a lot faster than I would have expected them to given we were still working on the language barrier, but then I should have known better. It wasn't that the Nazzadi were smarter than regular humans : it was that they saw their lessons as the key to being able to use the same magic they had seen used by Neumann, Visha, and others since their arrival to Castle Schwartzstein, which would make them much harder to kill. Any subject, no matter how boring, became much more interesting when you were motivated by a lifetime spent being hunted by a seemingly-invincible monster.

In the other direction of the cultural exchange, the Nazzadi had taught us useful formulas for purifying water and removing toxins from biological matter so that it became edible, if not palatable (the sight of a bunch of Nazzadi weeping in the cafeteria as they tasted proper food for the first time in their lives had already become legendary among the personnel of Division Y). They had also developed a bunch of survival spells that, while not as flashy as most of the standard arsenal of an Imperial aerial mage, would no doubt be very appreciated by mages caught in the kind of gruelling, prolonged warfare that I knew would become the norm in the future.

Next were a series of minor but necessary requests needing my approval, and then Elya's weekly report on her efforts to make Division Y's activities more secure. That particular document was covered in squiggly lines that would only cause anyone trying to decipher them to develop a splitting headache : I picked up my walking stick and, with a quick flash of will, applied the appropriate decryption spell. It was one of the suggestions made by Visha's friend since she'd arrived : nobody without a D-24 would be able to make sense of the document, and I suspected someone trying to brute-force it would only drive themselves to madness. Of course, the fact a D-24 was needed both for encryption and decryption meant we couldn't use it for everything – that, and I shivered at the thought of broadcasting Mythos-coded messages over the wireless. But for internal communications, it served well enough.

I read the report carefully before burning it to thin ash with another, albeit much more basic, quick spell. It seemed everything was progressing nicely on that particular front of Operation Enigma as well.

A less rational person than I might have started hoping the Albish would be unreasonable after all, if only so that all our preparations didn't end up for naught. But of course, I was too much of a peace-loving individual for that to be the case. I would very much prefer all our hard work to end up unused if it meant an end to this stupid war.

---

*October 15th, 1925 – Southern Coast of the Francois Republic*

König sighed as he looked around the empty building. They were too late.

This building had served as a smuggling outpost for decades, hosting various pieces of contraband brought in from the sea before being sent elsewhere. Now there was nothing in it except for empty crates and dust. He could still sense the unmistakeable lingering mana trace of an Eikon saturating the space, but the creature was gone. At a guess, they had only missed it by a few days, which made the whole thing even more annoying.

For four months, König and his team had tracked down their quarry across Francois. They had followed the tangled web of the missing Archbishop's connections across the Republic, but that trail had eventually run cold somewhere in the south of the Republic. After that, they had turned their attention to the rumors and strange reports by the local law enforcement, heavily relying on Sophie to smooth things over. This far from Parisee, attitudes toward the Empire were both more relaxed, as the people had been further from the front, and more agitated, because the stories of the Empire's Wunderwaffen seemed more like just that : stories.

Eventually, something had drawn their attention. Across the entire southern half of the Republic, several dozens people had gone missing, all of whom had relatives in the Republic's mage corps. Some of them had expressed sympathies for the various groups rejecting the Francois surrender, but others hadn't, not even in private. It hadn't taken a genius to figure out what might be going on, and so they had set off to find the missing citizens – a hunt that had brought them here, to this empty building on the outskirts of a wood near the coast of the Inner Sea.

"What do we do now ?" asked Sophie.

"Now ? We search everything and dismantle the building roof to ceiling, just to be sure they didn't leave any trace or clue. Then we go back to base, and I'll contact the Major and tell her about this."

"She won't be happy," commented Kuhn.

"Of course she won't. I am not exactly jumping with joy myself." König sighed, then shook himself. "The Eikon could still be around. Stay focused, everyone."

As they'd learned in the Parisean catacombs, so long as the Francois supersoldiers remained in his human form, König wouldn't be able to detect their mana signature. The rest of his team knew that, so they began to work with an eye out for any sign of attack. It soon became clear that a lot of people had moved through the building recently – several small pits had been dug outside for latrines and disposal of garbage, indicating people had lived there before leaving, probably to meet up with a boat on the coast, and from there, who knew ? There were probably hundreds if not thousands of boats operating in the area that could have carried them anywhere around the Inner Sea.

Still, he had his suspicions. It was just that none of them were pleasant to think about, and all of them had implications way above his pay grade. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, König resigned himself to reporting failure to the Major. Four Eikons had escaped the Battle of the Rhine. One of them had died underneath Parisee. Another had been here recently. And unfortunately, König had a terrible certitude that those three weren't the only Eikons left on the planet anymore.

---

*October 16th, 1925 – The Holy See*

Under the surface, where uncounted pilgrims came from all across the world to witness the beauty of the Holy See, many secrets laid hidden from all but the most faithful. Underground archives and vaults collected the relics of past centuries alongside books and scrolls containing knowledge that had been judged too dangerous to be allowed to spread, but not tainted enough to deserve destruction. There were other rooms too, many of which hadn't seen use in centuries, since the Inquisition had cleansed Europa of heretic and pagan sorcery.

Now, these rooms had been re-opened, and given over to the newly formed Congregation of Michael, so that it might prepare to do its holy work safe from the malefic gaze of its foe. Ancient wards had been carved into the walls of this place by priest-mages who had sworn

their lives and souls to the Lord, and they kept the mana emanations of what happened within from being detected by the magical radars of the Kingdom of Ildoa.

General De Lugo and Archbishop Beauvais walked together through these venerable corridors, lit by electric lights that had been installed down there as part of the refurbishing of the place for the Congregation's needs. The two of them were dressed in the simple clothes of monks, with nothing to mark their respective ranks in the Congregation (although De Lugo was self-aware enough to realize the Archbishop was far more important to the organization's work than he could ever be).

A pair of holy Knights stood guard at the door, their spears crossed to bar entry. When the two mortal men approached, they withdrew their weapons and stood at attention, recognizing the man who had transfigured them from fallible human clay into blessed instruments of God's will.

Beauvais paused at the entrance, smiling warmly at the two champions.

"Valentin, Clémentine. Nice to see you two. How are you today ?"

"Ready to serve as ever, Lord Archbishop," the two ascended answered as one.

"Good, good. Keep up the good work."

De Lugo had no idea how the Archbishop could distinguish the Holy Knights from one another. The difference in armor design made it easy enough to recognize whether they had been men or women, of course, but apart from that they looked completely identical to him.

Recruiting women into the ranks of the Holy Knights had sat ill with him at first. De Lugo had been raised with traditional Francois values, which were quite clear that a woman's place was definitely not on the battlefield. But his mind had been opened since then : they were all servants of the Lord, and the details of birth were irrelevant in His holy gaze. Men, women, colonials : it mattered not, so long as they were blessed with magical ability and had faith in their souls.

Dominico, the man who had brought De Lugo and Beauvais to the Holy See, was working tirelessly with his associates to ensure a constant flow of candidates to the Holy See. These candidates were then trained and taught the basics of magic before being chosen for the weekly Ascension, where the Archbishop would perform the ritual within one of the many consecrated places available to them.

In the months since their arrival, scores of candidates had been blessed with ascension, the Holy Knights remaining hidden from view so as not to repeat De Lugo's mistake in the Republic, where he had sent them out too early due to his desire to save his homeland. This time, the Congregation would strike with overwhelming strength, and leave nothing to chance as it fought to do the Lord's will and purge the Empire's heresy.

Despite the grace of God, the preparations weren't going entirely smoothly. For one thing, the Francois candidates who had arrived yesterday, escorted by the last Holy Knight to have

remained in Francois, would be the final ones. There would be no more from this source for the time being : the Imperial heretics had tracked down the operation like dogs.

De Lugo knew that some of the candidates, especially those who had yet to lay eyes upon a Holy Knight's glorious radiance, had doubts upon their arrival. It was understandable, for the human mind was small and recoiled from that which it did not understand. But being in the presence of the divine, learning the truth of the Congregation's holy mission, soon wiped those unworthy fears away, replacing them with iron-clad faith in the Congregation's purpose. By the time the candidates knelt before Archbishop Beauvais to be anointed and rise anew as Holy Knights, they were all ready to give their lives in order to strike down the evil that festered within the Empire.

Past the gate was a spiralling stairway going down, leading into the underground workshop where the Congregation's greatest weapons were prepared for the Crusade to come. As they descended, De Lugo spoke out :

"What do you make of the reports we've heard of what happened in Kemet ? Of the Imperial Army fighting at the gates of Kheriaha ?"

Even now, De Lugo still had a handful of contacts among the Francois colonies on the Southern Continent. With their help, he'd been able to arrange for a few agents of the Congregation to make their way there in order to observe the actions of the Empire. Their reports lately had been troubling, to say the least.

"Evil ever turns on itself," said the Archbishop wisely. "It is in its nature."

"But if the Allied Kingdom starts to follow the Empire into heresy …"

"Do not fear, my friend. Though their faith has its differences with our own, the Albish still serve the Lord, in their own way. In time, the path they walk will lead them to standing at our side against the evils of the Empire."

"… if you say so, then I shall trust that this is the will of the Lord."

They paused at the bottom of the stairs to catch their breaths, neither man being in the prime of their lives anymore. De Lugo looked ahead, at the heavy but unlocked door that stood between them and their destination.

"The work going on in here still feels blasphemous to me," admitted De Lugo. "How can man possibly improve that which was made by the hand of God ?"

"That is not what we are doing, General," the Archbishop gently rebuked him. "The rite of ascension bestowed upon me was but the fragment of His glory that my mortal mind could withstand. Just as I am but the hand of the Lord in shaping the faithful, so too is the good Doctor in bringing them ever closer to His perfection."

The two of them entered the underground laboratory. Various arcane devices were scattered through the room, buzzing with mana and electricity alike. On one table laid down the unconscious form of a Holy Knight, newly ascended and recovering from the blessed

surgeries that would make him the equal of his fellows, despite lacking any kind of martial or magical experience prior to his ascension.

And, at the center of the room, tinkering with a complex apparatus De Lugo couldn't begin to make sense of, was the man who had asked him and the Archbishop to come visit him, claiming he'd something to show them.

"Ah, gentlemen," said Doctor Adelheid von Schugel, greeting them with a smile on his face and his typical zealous glint in his bespectacled eyes. "Welcome ! "

Once, Doctor Schugel had been one of the Empire's top researchers, leader of a programme tasked with designing new, better computation orbs for the use of the Empire's aerial mage corps. But when the Empire had begun unleashing its Wunderwaffen on Europa, he had realized his country had fallen into heresy, and faked his death in order to escape the Empire, before being picked up by the Congregation of Michael. His expertise had proven very useful in helping the Holy Knights adjust to their new, heaven-forged bodies. De Lugo lacked the knowledge to make much sense of how exactly it worked (and, truth be told, Schugel wasn't exactly gifted at explaining his work to those lacking his particular spark of genius), but it had something to do with regulating the mana outflow through the implantation of basic, miniaturized computation orbs in certain parts of the Holy Knights' bodies.

Each such tuning cost a veritable fortune in resources, but if there was one thing the Holy See wasn't lacking in it was money, and Ildoa's neutrality in the Great War allowed for a constant flow of the materials required for Schugel's enhancements as well as his continued research.

"You wanted to see us, Doctor ?" asked De Lugo. The exiled Imperial nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes, yes ! By the grace of the Lord, I have made a breakthrough on my latest project. Look !"

He gestured dramatically at the table in front of him, as if expecting the two Francois to fall to their knees in awe.

"… I'm afraid I don't follow, Doctor," De Lugo said diplomatically. "It all looks very impressive, but what exactly is that ?"

"Oh, right. Sorry. This, my brothers in God, is the first functioning tri-core computation orb !"

De Lugo blinked. He knew, of course, that every computation orb used by modern aerial mage had a single core, and that the very notion of using two was still years, even decades into the future. If Schugel had actually managed to design an orb that could reliably use three at the same time … Wait.

"That is very impressive, Doctor," he began, "but the Holy Knights do not need computation orbs, do they ? They wield their power through the grace of God, not the imitation relics of Man."

"True, true ! But you don't understand, General," replied Schugel with a wide and slightly patronizing smile. "If my calculations are correct, and I know they are for the Lord Himself assured me of it in my visions, then this device will allow its user to perform *mana manifestation*. Even the Holy Knights are limited by the amount of power they can store within their blessed forms, for despite His blessing they are still forged of imperfect mortal clay. But with this, the Trinity's Tear, a chosen warrior will be able to accumulate magical power without an upper limit and unleash it all in battle !"

Now it made sense, and as De Lugo exchanged a glance with Beauvais, he saw that the Archbishop too had seized on the strategic import of such a capability.

"How soon can you start testing it ?" he asked the scientist. "And how many do you think you can prepare in time for our strike against the Empire ?"

"To answer your last question first, General, I'm afraid this will be the only one. It took the intervention of the Lord guiding my hand for me to create it : attempting to make a copy would be sacrilege." A shame, but even one such device would be of immense use against the Empire's monstrous weapons. "As for the first, that is part of why I called you. The Trinity's Tear needs a special wielder to manifest its full, God-given potential : we need a true chosen of the Lord, marked by Him to serve as His Apostle and carrier of His wrath unto His wayward foes."

"It will take me some time to finish the device," continued Schugel, looking between the General and the Archbishop. "Do you think you can find a worthy candidate by then ?"

"If we have to search the entirety of the Kingdom of Ildoa and the colonies," swore De Lugo, "we'll find one."

"Don't fret, General," said Beauvais, still smiling beatifically. "In this, as in all things, the Lord will provide. We have but to follow His guidance."

Chapter End Notes

AN : DUN DUN DUN !

Honestly, I'm shocked that not all of you saw that coming a mile away. Not only did the manner of Schugel's "death" not leave a body behind, but Dominico specifically mentioned the Congregation had recruited someone from the Empire.

Oh, and the Congregation has a lot of Eikons that they are working on improving too. That's probably worth mentioning, I guess. Also, if you have suggestions for a character that may be expi-ed to serve as the wielder of the Trinity's Tear, please go ahead. I have a back-up candidate lined up if nothing inspires the Muse in the mean time (it will still be some time before the Congregation makes its move in the open), but I'm not quite satisfied with them.

I find it deeply amusing that being brainwashed by Being X has inadvertently turned De Lugo a lot more tolerant by our modern standards than he was before (although, as stated in the chapter, the main reason I went that route was that the Congregation's options to get recruits are somewhat limited).

Something funny to do is read the entire scene of Lergen confronting the Albish explorers like a James Bond villain and try to imagine his own point of view while doing this. Oh, Lergen. At least I'm still kinder to him than the canon LN. No, I don't think I am exaggerating there. Read it for yourself if you want to see what I mean.

And yes, the Kemetians are aware of the monsters that attacked Kheriaha. The fact that the battle went on for several hours after the Heresiarch was destroyed and the sandstorm abated guaranteed that would happen. Of course, this chapter's newspaper is biased against Albion, as I hope I made clear. You can expect the AK's own headlines to present the events somewhat differently.

Do not use my presentation of Kemet's political situation in a history exam, please. This is a fanfic of an Alternate Earth where magic is real, and I only used our own history as inspiration. Also, I didn't name the King of Kemet for the same reason I didn't name the Presidents of Francois and the Unified States : they don't have canon names, and I don't want to get IRL politics involved by adapting the names of politicians of the era.

That's all for now. I look forward to your comments, reactions, and suggestions for this story going forward.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*IMPERIAL ARMY THREATENS KHERIAHA, BLOCKADES SUAN CANAL !*

*As the fog of war lifts and news from the Southern Continent begin to reach us, the true scope of Imperial ambitions and depravity is revealed. Following the retreat of the colonial troops at Al-Alamein, the Imperial Army dared not confront the might of Arigzandria and instead moved south, taking the commanders of Arigzandria by surprise and reaching Kheriaha, the capital of Kemet. There, at the very walls of the city, they performed a gruesome demonstration of the horrors their Wunderwaffen are capable of in order to frighten the Kemetians into submission. Terrifying, inhuman screams were heard all across the city as the Empire's monsters were let loose on hapless captives, whose corpses were later burned to ash to hide the evidence of these monstrous acts.*

*This vile tactic proved successful, and the civilian authorities opened Kheriaha to the Imperials without open resistance, though individual acts of heroic defiance still took place. Having overextended their supply lines, the Imperial troops pillaged the city to sustain themselves, the population too terrified to protest. With hundreds of thousands of civilians in reach of the Imperial Army and its monsters, the soldiers of Albion are now forced to hold their hand, lest the Imperials make their silent promise a reality and turn the Kemetian capital to cinders. Thanks to this cowardly act, the Imperial troops were able to move east and seize the Suan Canal, ruthlessly opening fire on all ships flying the flag of the Allied Kingdom, uncaring of the civilians onboard.*

*In a speech, Prime Minister Churbull swore that the Allied Kingdom would not let itself be bullied into submission by the Empire's brutish tactics, and promised swift retribution for the Imperial Army's barbarous actions ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Londinium Times, October 15th, 1925.

---

*October 15th, 1925 – Londinium*

Henry Carnahan cursed under his breath as he lowered his copy of the Londinium Times, unable to read any further, and looked across the table at his drinking companion.

"Can you believe this tripe ?" He scowled. "It's like they aren't even pretending to be accurate !"

Though he hadn't spent much time in Kheriaha after the battle, he was reasonably certain Captain Uger had taken them through a circuitous route to the Albish embassy there. Maybe it had been to avoid the monstrous traffic, maybe it had been to show them the people whose lives the Allied Kingdom's actions had endangered. Whatever the case, it had been enough for Henry to get an idea of the public opinion regarding what had happened thanks to his

knowledge of the local language, and it was clear that the Kheriahans weren't afraid of the Empire – well, at least not anymore than any sane population would be at the presence of an armed force at its walls, whatever its provenance and intentions. As for the corpses that had been burned, well, it wasn't like the Empire could leave the bodies of the Fiends just laying around. Who knew what sicknesses might have festered in such inhuman flesh as it rotted !

No, the entire thing was a whole bunch of hogwash, deliberately cherry-picking a handful of facts and interpreting them in whatever way made the Empire look worse. By contrast, the Imperial newspaper Henry had managed to get his hands on (and which he kept in his home, not wanting to be taken for a foreign collaborator) had more or less reported the facts : that Albish activities in the desert had resulted in a horde of magically-altered monsters advancing on Kheriaha, resulting in the Imperial Southern Expedition acting quickly to protect the city. They had even praised the Albish Field Marshall for taking their warnings seriously and not interfering with their operations, despite having been kept in the dark by his own government.

"The article's writer probably didn't know the truth," answered the other man. "And even if he did, or doubted the official version of events he was given, he couldn't have published it without being accused of being working against the country. It's the way things are done these days," he continued with a somber expression.

"My friends in the *Times* told me that their bosses aren't even pretending they're reporting the truth anymore when they are in the building," Andrew went on. "There is a visit by blokes from the Ministry nearly every day, and not from the kind of people wearing uniforms, if you catch my drift. When it comes to the war, truth doesn't have much to do with the headlines, I'm afraid."

"And is it the same for every damn newspaper in this country ?" asked Henry.

"My old colleagues in *World Today News* tell me the same thing is happening there – the government doesn't seem to trust any newspaper to self-censure anymore. The *Times* are just more obvious about it because they tend to focus on the news in this country, while WTN covers more international stuff. But come on, Henry. You aren't stupid. You knew this was going on before."

"You're right," sighed Henry, deflating. "I suppose I already knew before, but somehow it feels different, having been involved in the whole mess and then seeing these lies printed about it. But then, you would know all about that, wouldn't you Andrew ?"

Yes, letting the Empire end the Great War as the undisputed victor would herald the country's rise as the hegemon of Europa, with the nations of Dacia, Legadonia and Francois humbled by defeat and grateful for the Empire's generous peace terms. But, as Andrew had vehemently argued in the piece whose submission to his editor at *World Today News* had led to his quiet firing from the newspaper, maintaining the Allied Kingdom's supremacy wasn't worth the hundreds of thousands of death that a modern war involved (and that, Henry reminded himself with a fresh shiver of dread, had been before the Wunderwaffen had even gotten involved).

"Seeing things in person does change your perspective, there's no denying that," agreed the younger man with a wince.

Andrew had worked on the Rhine Front as a war reporter, documenting the horrors of trench warfare for the Allied Kingdom and posterity, and still been there during the last days of the battle. Having witnessed the Francois' supersoldiers in action – including their callous disregard for allied casualties and willingness to open fire on friendly troops trying to withdraw – any positive opinion he might have held about the Kingdom joining the Great War had long since faded away. But despite the government interrogating him at length once he'd made his way back to the homeland in order to extract every bit of intel they could, in the end he hadn't been allowed to share that knowledge with the public, and even his attempts to protest the formal declaration of war had ended with his firing.

To say that Henry and Andrew were close would be stretching the truth. They were, however, acquaintances with a certain degree of respect for one another. Early in his career as a journalist, Andrew had been sent to interview Henry as part of a piece on one of the digs he had led, and the two had hit it off reasonably well, going for drinks together after the interview, with the Professor regaling Andrew with stories of his time outside the country that weren't exactly fit for print.

There was something different about Andrew now, but then that was to be expected. The man may not have fought himself, but he had still walked among the trenches of the Francois Republic, meeting people and talking with them only for them to be dead the next day, victim of a stray bullet or an artillery shell.

It had been a surprise when Andrew had contacted him after his return from Kemet aboard an express courier chartered by the Allied Kingdom's embassy and asked to meet him to discuss what had happened on the Southern Continent. Henry had mulled on his decision for some time, before deciding he might as well accept. He needed the distraction, if nothing else, and maybe talking about it would help.

They were in one of the many, many pubs of Londinium, though Henry hadn't visited that particular one before. He could see why Andrew had suggested they meet there in his message, though : the pub was in a part of town just the right side of respectable, and was frequented by enough other patrons that so long as they kept their voices down, nobody would be able to listen in on their conversation.

Henry should probably have been more uneasy with all that skulduggery, but after what had happened in Kemet, it would take more to disturb him. He still woke up in the middle of night in cold sweat, awakened from nightmares of being chased through alien streets by impossible monsters, and expected it would be a long time before those stopped. His wife was being far more understanding about it than he deserved, especially since he hadn't told her what had happened to him – partly because he'd been ordered to keep quiet, but mostly because he'd rather not burden her with the knowledge of how close he'd come to death. He had already worried her enough by admitting he'd been captured by the Imperial Army as it was.

"So," said Andrew in a more serious tone. "Given that I doubt the Londinium Times' version of events has much to do with what actually happened, what can you tell me ?"

Over the course of the next hour and two more drinks, the archaeologist told the journalist everything that had happened, from his recruitment by the office of the Royal Wizard to his return to Albion. At several points of the retelling, he had to pause and take a sip of his drink to steady his nerves, which Andrew let him do without question, for which Henry was grateful. The memories were still fresh in his mind, and so was their terror. The black pyramid at the center of the Nameless City hadn't been the first time he'd seen someone die (field work took you to dangerous places, and accidents happened) but it had certainly been the most horrible.

Technically, Henry was committing treason by sharing this information with Andrew, especially since he couldn't deny being fully aware of what the other man intended to do with it. But the cavalier attitude with which his employers had dismissed the events in Kemet had rubbed him the wrong way. Fighting against Imperial domination of Europa was all well and good, but if it led to cities being eaten by hordes of monsters then Henry would much rather teach his children to speak Imperial and drink coffee rather than tea. And if the government felt it needed to keep its own citizens from knowing the truth, then he felt they should know it as a matter of principle.

Besides, Andrew had promised that he would only use his story as a basis for his own investigation, so that any one of his sources was as safe from trouble as possible. Henry had no idea how well this would work, but he was willing to take the risk if it meant even a slightly lower chance of a disaster like Kemet happening again – which meant putting pressure on the government not to try its hand at obtaining ancient magical knowledge without considering the dangers again, and apparently the only way to do that was through public opinion.

"Well," said Andrew once he was done, looking down at his notes. "That's … quite the tale."

"I'm still processing it myself," confessed Henry. "I know it all sounds like something out of the penny dreadfuls, but it still happened. To be frank, I'm thinking of retiring from field work and keeping to lecturing from now on, at least until this damn war is over."

"You don't think the folks in charge would try that kind of stuff again, do you ?" asked Andrew, aghast. "Between this and what I saw on the Rhine, it's really looking like the Empire are the only ones who can use these magical superweapons without it blowing up in their faces. This Lergen guy you talked about is better at his job than De Lugo was, that's for sure."

"Oh, he definitely knows his job," replied Henry, suppressing a shiver at the memory of those cold, cold eyes looking at him while he calmly tore them apart with words. "As for whether the Kingdom would try something like that again … I don't know. I wasn't told how we knew about the city's existence in the first place, just that it was in the Bardad Desert, we'd a compass pointing to it, and it was my job to get the miss there and assist her in uncovering its secrets."

As cowardly as the thought was, Henry was glad he hadn't been in charge of the expedition, and had been told so little up front. That way, he could honestly tell himself that he wasn't responsible for what had happened and what had almost happened. He hoped Miss Niniane was dealing with it all well, though the two of you hadn't met since their return to Albion.

"Once you've finished your investigation, how do you intend to get the word out ?" he asked, trying to get his mind off that particular subject. "None of the official papers will publish it."

"Me and a few others are running an underground printing press," replied Andrew. "We have found, let's say, sponsors who are interested in letting the public know the truth. They provided us with the funds to buy what we needed and sustain ourselves in the meantime, although I've had to cut down my expenses, especially with all the inflation."

"Isn't that …"

"Illegal ?" Andrew shrugged. "Sure is. By the latest round of laws, I think we'd get something between five or ten years in jail if we're caught. But someone has to ensure that the truth still gets out, even if almost nobody hears it or even wants to. Nobody in the trenches wanted to fight after their first week on the front, but they didn't have a choice : it was made for them by people who knew they wouldn't have to fight themselves."

"Those sponsors of yours," Henry began hesitantly. "They're just concerned citizens worried about our government's conduct of the war, right ?"

Andrew smirked, clearly seeing what Henry was hinting at. "Are you worried I'm getting involved with unsavory sorts ? Don't worry. Me and my associates checked things out, and they don't seem to be agents of a foreign power. Just members of the honorable opposition who're chaffing at the whole 'national unity' thing the government pulled out to avoid having to justify its actions. They might have more than the average number of acquaintances at Berun, but that's hardly unique in this city."

"True," Henry admitted, before finishing his drink, tossing a handful of bills on the table (he couldn't exactly ask Andrew to cover the tab after what he'd just told him, after all) and standing up. "Well, I should get back home. I promised the missus I would spend some of my unexpected vacation time with her and the kids."

Truth be told, it hadn't been a hard promise to make. There was nothing quite like staring certain death in the face to make you value what truly mattered more.

"Enjoy it, friend," said Andrew, rising his own drink in salute. "I have a feeling the peace at home won't last forever."

Remembering the cold gaze of Colonel Lergen as he promised retribution if the Kingdom continued on its current course, Henry couldn't find it in himself to deny Andrew's words, much as he wanted to.

---

*"The Imperial campaign on the Southern Continent has once again proven the terrible potency of their Wunderwaffen. Despite having a two to one numerical advantage and holding strong defensive position, our forces at Al-Alamein were completely routed, with only minimal Imperial casualties.*

*During that battle, and later at Kheriaha, new kinds of Imperial monstrous warriors were witnessed in action. From what I have been able to observe, one of those breeds appear able*

*to use illusion spells to mask its true location, making it difficult to hit with ranged weapons. Another is able to move through matter like ghosts, which the Imperials used to devastating effect to cripple the defenses of Al-Alamein.*

*These creatures fought alongside the Devils of the Rhine, leading me to think they are related in some manner, although we still do not know how Division Y created them. Of particular interest, however, is the fact that when I approached the Imperial encampments outside of Kheriaha (prior to Division Y's departure into the desert to locate the Nameless City), I saw no signs of those chimeric horror whatsoever.*

*The fact that the Empire's stealth mages were able to deliver Colonel Lergen's message directly to the chambers of Field Marshal Giah also reinforces the need for the Kingdom to streamline the use of the wards that protected Londinium. I have no doubt that the threat of wiping out all high officers in Kemet is one the Imperial Southern Expedition is capable of executing should it feel the need : indeed, I believe it is only the desire to prevent chaos and lower-ranking officers taking action on their own initiative that held Lergen's hand in the first place.*

*Information about the Battle of Kheriaha is more difficult to obtain due to the storm that obscured visibility for much of the engagement. However, small talk between Imperial soldiers indicate that the Imperials were able to destroy the Heresiarch encountered by our agents within the Nameless City by using a previously unseen method of empowering one of their aerial mages to the point he could go toe-to-toe with the Heresiarch and destroy him, ending the sandstorm and paving the way for the Imperial victory. The magical detectors of Kheriaha recorded a mana spike unlike anything previously encountered (a copy of the mana signature and its potency is attached to this report)."*

Excerpt from the report of the Albish agent, codename 'Mister John', October 12th, 1925.

---

*October 16th, 1925 – Londinium*

"What happened in Kemet was a shitshow, there is no point in denying it," began Kay as he and the other members of the Round Table sat down in another of their meeting rooms. All of them looked exhausted, except Merlin, who no longer looked as if he were on death's door, having recovered from his efforts in defending Londinium from Division Y's attack. "Field Marshal Giah in Arigzandria sent me a rather colorful message. After receiving the Imperial message demanding he not intervene, he sent a pair of aerial mages to observe the situation in Kheriaha, and they came back basically confirming everything Miss Niniane and Mister Carnahan told us."

"We've also received very pointed letters from the King of Kemet," added Mordred. "He hasn't formally accused us of being responsible for the catastrophe that almost befell his capital, but he's made it clear that we can expect a prolonged cooling of our relations with his government."

"That arrogant bastard needs to be reminded of his place," grunted Kay. "He only rules because we put his family on the throne to begin with."

"Maybe, but we aren't very popular in Kemet at the moment," said Agravain, with considerable understatement. "Our control of the media over there is much less tight than it is in the homeland, and the Imperial version of what happened is firmly established in the public mindset by now. They aren't saying anything about ancient cities full of monsters, of course, but the stories of secret magical laboratories in the middle of the desert suffering disastrous containment breaches aren't much better for our reputation. Arguably, they are even worse than the truth would be. If we try to be too heavy-handed, the King of Kemet might just throw caution to the wind and appeal to the Empire for help in securing his country's independence from our Commonwealth. And I don't need to tell you that we can hardly afford a rebellion at the moment."

"The problem is the Suan Canal," said Mordred. "Churbull's rhetoric might keep the plebs calm, but our ships needing to go around the Southern Continent is doing a number on our supply situation, to say nothing of the economy. Fortunately, we aren't the only ones unhappy with the Imperial Army's presence next to the Canal. Even with the Imperials only blocking our ships from using it, global trade has still taken a hit as captains are unwilling to risk the journey."

"Any news from the Unified States on that ?" asked Kay.

"The States are still divided on the question of the war," replied Mordred, "but their President is still supporting us on the down-low. We have been allowed to buy military equipment from them with a generous 'discount', which will greatly help arming our colonial divisions."

"Mmm. If we can gather enough strength in the East, we might be able to overwhelm the Imperial Southern Expedition through sheer numbers," mused Kay. "The Wunderwaffen are powerful, but they are not invincible, and they need the support of conventional troops to be of maximal effectiveness. And their supply lines are stretched out thin : they might have overextended there. A combined strike from the south and the north – assuming we can convince Giah to get off his arse and move – might be enough to defeat them."

"It might not come to this," pointed out Agravain. "I don't think the Empire will be able to stay in Kemet forever. They are aware of the difficulties of keeping their forces supplied, after all, and of the political aspect of the situation. But every week they spend there is another blow to both our economy and our military."

"Which is exactly what Lergen told the young miss," sighed Kay. "Alright, let's address the elephant in the room then. To start with, Merlin : how is your apprentice doing ? Is she still going hysterical about the dangers of trying to match the Imperials' capabilities ?"

"She came close to death for the very first time in her life," replied Merlin with a slight frown at the language used by his colleague. "Some degree of shock is to be expected; I would be more worried if she appeared completely fine. She'll calm down once she has been given some time to recover."

"And what about the artefact she sent us ? Any progress with it ?"

"Oh, yes," Merlin said, eyes suddenly alight with enthusiasm. "With the regalia here in Londinium, casting and maintaining the ward over the city has become much less straining.

With the new mages being trained in its operation, I believe extending the ward to other key locations will also be possible soon."

"Good," said Kay. "I will have a list of the most vital areas on the mainland drafted. Now, about what happened at Kheriaha, I had the mana signature of the individual who fought the Heresiarch checked against our records : whoever it is, we have never encountered them before. And as far as we know, Degurechaff is still in the Empire. Which means Division Y has another super-mage of some sort in their ranks."

"I want to make it clear that those readings are absurd," added Merlin. "Whoever it is, they have as much power as an entire company of powerful mages. The fact the Empire didn't deploy them before and the suddenness with which the readings plummeted at the end suggest that they cannot maintain that level of power for long, and that using it comes with its own risks and costs, but even a handful of minutes would be enough for them to wipe out entire military formations and crush any aerial mages we send after them."

"Well, at least we can detect them, unlike their other mage-hunters," said Mordred with a wry smile. "Merlin, any other good news ?"

"We have started working on what can best be described as 'castigation' spells," replied the old wizard. "Based on what we've been able to translate and our own analysis of the spells themselves, they should be able to do considerable damage on Division Y's Wunderwaffen. Without anything to test them against, however, we cannot be certain of their reliability. But based on Niniane's experience, they should be of some effect. Speaking of which, I checked the relic she brought back meticulously : there is no sign of any tempering. It works just as well as it did before, and there doesn't seem to be any trap added to it."

"Lergen is taunting us," growled Kay. "The bastard is telling us we can keep our toys, because they don't matter at all in the grand scheme of things. The Empire makes its own weapons, while we are left scrambling in the dust of history to find the means to even begin defending ourselves."

"Actually," started Merlin with a dark look, "I suspect there is more to it than that."

"What do you mean ?" asked Agravain.

"One thousand years ago," Merlin began, "the Not-Man was defeated in Europa. Thousands of years before that, the Black Pharaoh was defeated in Kemet. In each case, these individuals led armies of monsters and were only defeated by people wielding 'miracles' before their vanquishers sought to erase all traces that they'd ever existed. The text we have on the Not-Man tells us that he claimed he would return in a thousand years, while the Heresiarch seemed to believe his master was still somewhere and wanted to join up with him."

"What are you getting to, Merlin ?" asked Agravain.

"Immortality has been a goal mages have strived for since the very dawn of magic," explained the Royal Wizard. He looked at each of the other three members of the Round Table present in turn, making sure they understood the seriousness of his next words : "I

believe what we face here is someone who actually figured it out thousands of years ago, using reincarnation and preserving his memories from one rebirth to the next, with a delay of centuries between each death and reincarnation."

There was a moment of silence as Merlin's words sunk in.

"But, that's …" Mordred trailed off.

"Absurd ? Crazy ?" Merlin chuckled mirthlessly. "Oh yes, certainly. But impossible ? So is the very notion of an undead priest slumbering for ages in a city built under a black sun, surrounded by petrified, man-eating abominations. So are most of the Wunderwaffen, for that matter. Our definition of impossible clearly needs to be reworked if we are to adapt to this new reality we find ourselves in, as our duty to the Kingdom demands. We know Lergen was involved in the founding of Division Y, and is clearly trusted enough to be given command of its assets not just on the Rhine Front but also on the Southern Continent, despite the two situations being dramatically different. You've read the reports on the Devils, and the mage-hunters. Do you really believe a mere man could command them like this ?"

"Then why would he destroy the Heresiarch and his army ?" asked Kay. "Several hundred of supersoldiers are nothing to scoff at, even if Mister John's report made it clear that these 'Fiends' were inferior to the Imperial Devils."

"Because the Empire doesn't know," said Mordred, eyes wide in realization. "He has already tried setting himself up as king and ruling with his horde of monsters in past incarnations, and it didn't work. In the modern era, that has even less of a chance of working. But by becoming part of the Imperial warmachine and arranging the creation of Division Y while masking the truth of the Wunderwaffen as 'rediscovering ancient spells' – although I guess that isn't technically a lie – he can build up his strength while staying hidden."

"So he destroyed the Heresiarch to keep his cover," said Kay, seeing where his associated was going, "because he knew the Heresiarch might recognize him somehow and blow his cover. If true, then that was a hell of a cold thing to do. The undead priest waited for his master for millennia, only for Lergen to dispose of him because he was no longer useful."

"By definition, an immortal being would not think as we do," said Merlin. "I imagine by now, he sees all other beings as mere pawns or obstacles rather than living people. When the attempt to strike at Londinium was thwarted, he must have realized we'd found the remnants of his old enemies – didn't we find it strange that the Empire struck straight for Kemet in the first place ? Lergen must have told the Empire that Division Y had identified the counter as originating from there, so that he could use the Imperial Southern Expedition as cover to clean up loose ends."

"Wait, wait," said Agravain, raising his hands. "Is such a thing even possible ? I'm not just talking about the whole immortality thing. I'm asking, how could he go undetected ?"

"The Empire tests all its citizens for magical potential," said Merlin, "but I can think of half a dozen ways he could have avoided notice off the top of my head, and that's without taking into account any ability to fake the tests outright he might possess. Niniane didn't detect any mana from him when she faced him, despite being within arm's reach."

"It would also explain why he was completely unfazed when he faced Drake back on the Rhine," added Kay. "Even without his bodyguards, he was never in any danger. If worse came to worse, he probably would have killed everyone in the bunker and claimed to be the sole survivor of the crossfire."

"But then why would he return the relic to Niniane, if it's one of the things that can hurt his creations ?" asked Agravain.

"To throw us off his scent," said Mordred. "Just like his entire speech about us not knowing what we are doing was meant to prevent us from becoming an actual threat to his plans ! It's genius. If not for that old text Merlin found completely by accident, we would have no idea what is going on and might actually consider negotiating peace by now, which would give Division Y, and thus Lergen, incredible prestige and influence within the Empire – and all the time they might need to grow stronger."

"It's a cycle that has gone for God knows how long," murmured Merlin. "Every time he returns, he starts again, unstoppable until his enemies figure out his creations' weakness – the power of the 'Adversary' the Heresiarch talked about – either by learning from a past iteration or by re-discovering them under the pressure of his hordes of monsters. So far, he has always been defeated, so he is adapting his strategy. Make Division Y indispensable to the Empire's warmachine, and its influence will grow and grown, until the day he can take over and declare himself openly, with the mightiest army in the world to fight alongside all the Wunderwaffen his servants will have created for him."

Silence descended on the room as each member of the Round Table considered that awful possibility. Kay was the first to recover :

"This has to stay between us," he said firmly. "For one thing, it's only a theory. We lack definite proof, and I pray to God that we are mistaken and are just seeing apocalyptic threats where none exist due to how close to disaster we just got in Kemet. For another, let's be honest : we would be laughed at, even worse than the Francois were when they claimed the Imperials were using demons from Hell in the trenches. Nobody would believe us, and it would badly hurt our international standing at a time when we really need all the friends we can get."

"Agreed," said Agravain. "However, I believe we should still reach out to our contacts in the Imperial aristocracy. They might no longer be the dominant power in the Empire, but they still wield considerable influence, and they most definitely wouldn't agree with a jumped-up Colonel using the Wunderwaffen to stage a coup. I suspect there are already many among them who worry about such a possibility in any case."

"I certainly wouldn't rest easy knowing so much power was concentrated under the control of so few," nodded Mordred. "What about the home front ? Nobody is speaking out for now, but we're going to be pressured to negotiate an end to the war sooner or later. I'm not sure we can hold on long enough for the Imperials to be forced out of Kemet and the Suan Canal to be opened again."

"He's His Majesty's chosen representative," said Kay. "Tell him our theory, though make sure he understands it's only that and that we are investigating further. If I know him, that'll be

enough to convince him we need to stay in this war to the bitter end. The prospect of Imperial domination over Europa using the Wunderwaffen is already a bad enough prospect, but they being controlled by an immortal wizard is far worse. Merlin, we'll need these 'castigation spells' as soon as possible. If you are right, then they might be the only way to end this nightmare."

The Royal Wizard nodded solemnly. "I will not fail you, friends. Together, we'll protect the Allied Kingdom – no, the entire world – from this ancient evil."

---

*"As has been the Allied Kingdom's policy for centuries, their primary goal in joining the Great War is to prevent the rise of a continental hegemon, that is to say, the birth of a power in Europa of such overwhelming might, wealth and influence that the very idea of fighting them would be ridiculous. In the past, this policy has taken the form of supporting whoever was opposing the rising power of the time by lending money and equipment (allowing the Kingdom to make tidy profits in the aftermath by collecting on these debts), with the occasional direct military involvement.*

*This policy was in play during the early stages of the war, when Albion supported the Entente and Republic while publicly remaining neutral, as, due to the continued efforts of the Imperial Army and the diplomatic corps, it didn't have a casus belli that its population would accept (although we also believe most of the Albish leadership of the time was also reluctant to enter the war directly as well, and happy to play along with our endeavours to keep them out of it). However, with the fall of the Entente and the imminent defeat of the Republic, the Allied Kingdom changed its course on May 26th, 1925 by dispatching a task force of aerial mages to strike at Imperial field command in the Rhine.*

*We still do not know who sent Colonel Drake out to capture or kill Colonel Lergen. The Kingdom's official sources put the blame on the Under-Secretary of the War Office, but it is clear from even a cursory examination of the fact that the man was used as a scapegoat. The lack of an official declaration of war prior to their dispatch, asides from a frankly staggering level of Albish arrogance, showcases how deeply the Kingdom's intelligence services had penetrated the Republic. Not even all of its leadership were aware of how untenable the situation on the frontline had become as a result of Operation Shock & Awe, but the Kingdom realized the situation in time to send their mages to join the fray.*

*That Colonel Drake attempted to capture Colonel Lergen betrays the true objective of this raid. It wasn't just about throwing the Imperial Army into confusion to allow the Republican forces to recover : their goal was to learn more about the Wunderwaffen and Division Y.*

*Thus, the existence of the Wunderwaffen, and the knowledge to build them, are at the core of what we believe to be the current goals of the Allied Kingdom in the war. As was demonstrated against the Duchy, Entente and Republic, the Wunderwaffen render the already might Imperial warmachine unstoppable when facing an enemy lacking in equivalent superweapons (and as was seen in the last Battle of the Rhine, not all such weapons are created equal either).*

*Without superweapons of their own, the Allied Kingdom now finds itself under threat, not just of losing its influence over Europan affairs, but of genuinely being invaded and occupied by*

*an enemy nation. Indeed, with proper planning, Projekt U alone could allow the Imperial Army to make a landing on Albion. Therefore, in order to guarantee the security of their nation, the Allied Kingdom's leadership seek to either develop their own superweapon program or dismantle the Empire's own – preferably both. By comparison, weakening the Empire by imposing monetary reparations, economic sanctions or partitioning its territory has likely become a secondary concern, especially as Division Y requires comparatively few resources to function (though the Allied Kingdom may not yet be aware of that fact).*

*Recent events have shown that the Allied Kingdom is making headway in securing the means to defend itself from the Wunderwaffen, although they lack the ability to fight back in kind, and appear restricted to defending their own territories. With this in mind, it is our belief that, should the military situation of the Allied Kingdom beyond its immediate borders become hopeless, negotiations to end the war would be possible as long as the Empire made certain assurances as to its safety and sovereignty ..."*

Excerpt from the confidential report titled 'The Albish war goals in the Great War' compiled by Imperial Intelligence analysts at the request of Brigadier General Zettour as part of the preparations for Operation Enigma, submitted on September 10th, 1925.

---

*October 16th, 1925 – Londinium*

The young woman who was known to Kingdom and Empire as Niniane sat alone in her study, within the tower that, according to traditions going back centuries, was the domain of the Royal Wizard. Her chair was turned with its back to her desk so that she was facing the window, but she didn't see the city stretching in all directions on the other side, nor did she hear the dimmed hubbub of hundreds of thousands of people going about their daily lives, which even distance and thick glass couldn't completely suppress.

Instead, she saw a black pyramid, a grinning skull, and heard the screams of men she had led to their doom and abandoned to die. For almost an hour, she simply sat there, lost in darkening thoughts, then she shook herself and pulled her focus back to the present. The past was the past, and no matter how much she might wish she had done things differently she couldn't go back and change it. Her concern had to be for the future, and there was plenty to be concerned about.

When she had returned to Albion with Professor Carnahan in tow, she hadn't known what to expect. She had thought she might be punished for the disaster her actions had caused, and wouldn't have fought it. Instead, the Royal Wizard had congratulated her. He had told her that she had done the best she could, that her actions had given the Kingdom the tools it needed for its protection against the Empire, and that he didn't blame her for what had happened.

She had stared at him in shock. Then, during her debriefing, she had done her best to pass on Colonel Lergen's warning, but it had been clear that her master hadn't really been listening to that part of her report. Then, once she was done, she had been given a couple of weeks of vacation to rest while the Allied Kingdom prepared for its next move in the Great War.

Her master thought she needed time to recover from what had happened in Kemet. He was right in that she definitely did need time, but he didn't understand. Perhaps that was only to

be expected : for all his wisdom and knowledge, Merlin had never seen the fruits of Elder Magic with his own eyes as she had. They were still distant concepts to him : even wielding the Kemetian wards in defense of Londinium wasn't the same as seeing Fiends and Devils in action.

But Niniane had seen them, and knew that for all their terrifying natures they were still only servants to greater powers – powers such as the Heresiarch and the Imperial mage who had defeated him. At the time, she had been kept behind the walls of Kheriaha and deprived of any equipment, but she had still felt the absurdly powerful mana signatures clashing outside the city.

Merlin seemed to think what had happened in Kemet had given the Allied Kingdom the tools to fight back against the Empire. Niniane was afraid that the Empire hadn't yet begun to fight against Albion. Just like most Albish officials didn't realize the true madness of trench warfare that had consumed so many lives in the war so far, her master didn't understand the true scope of the Wunderwaffen – and, Niniane expected, trying to explain it to him would be just as difficult.

With a sigh, the young woman turned her chair back to her desk and looked at what laid on it. It was a sheet of paper that had been slipped into her affairs when the Imperials had given them back to her, before Carnahan and her had been brought to the Albish embassy in Kheriaha. She had no idea who had put it there : the bundle had passed through the hands of several Imperial soldiers out of her sight, any of them could have placed the pamphlet in it.

She knew how to read Imperial, of course : even before the Wunderwaffen, the country had been at the forefront of modern magical research, and any mage worth the name had to be able to read their papers on the subject. Atop it were four words, printed in big, blocky letters that, like the cheap paper on which they were printed, betrayed the amateurish nature of the pamphlet :

*'Der Pfad der Sterne'*. 'The Path of Stars'.

Niniane recognized those words. They had first appeared in Arene, following what the locals called the Eclipsed Liberation, when the Francois Republic had tried to incite a popular uprising to cripple Imperial logistics while their new supersoldiers went after the assets of Division Y in the city. Instead, Tanya Degurechaff, Division Y's most powerful supersoldier if the Kingdom's intelligence was believed, had slaughtered the Francois' Holy Knights and put down the uprising in mere moments. Niniane had read the reports sent by agents after the quarantine had been lifted : she knew that a strange mood had befallen the city in the aftermath of the Eclipsed Liberation.

Anti-Imperial sentiment had all but vanished, with the few people still speaking out against the Empire only doing so to discuss whether the country bore some responsibility for the Great War, due to its sabre-rattling intimidating its neighbours. Even that was done in calm discussions aimed at devising means of preventing the same from repeating in the future. There had also been the birth of an art movement, as hundreds of Arene citizens sought to express what they had witnessed during the Eclipsed Liberation, when a strange moon had shone amidst an alien sky over the city, as the Lady of Stars fought the Republican supersoldiers. She had seen photographs of the works of one artist in particular, a child whose

parents had both died during the battle from a Republican spell gone off-course, and whose depictions of the Imperial Wunderwaffe were as unsettling as they were beautiful.

And threaded through all of this was the Path of Stars, a strange mix of philosophy and religion that claimed all people were equal, deserving of life, respect and happiness. Nobody knew who had first coined the term and written the pamphlets that had been found across the city in the days following the Eclipsed Liberation, but the movement – which some had already named a cult – had spread like wildfire through Arene. It hadn't spread beyond the city yet, as its people worked on rebuilding the damage from the attack and came to terms with it.

Until now, Niniane had never given the whole matter much interest, having been too busy studying the Kemetian spells her teacher had discovered. Now, however, it seemed she had nothing better to do, and she certainly could use something to take her mind off the memories that haunted both her sleep and her waking hours.

Slowly, Niniane began to read. At first, her eyes frequently glanced at the door, like a child afraid of being caught doing something she wasn't supposed to. But as she read on, these glances became less and less frequent, until she was entirely focused on the text's contents.

The pamphlet spoke of peace and unity, of the futility and ugliness of war, driven by naught but greed and ambition. To the young woman, the words made a lot more sense than they would have before her journey to Kemet. Having witnessed the utter inhumanity of the Heresiarch and his minions, the differences between humans paled to insignificance. Albish or Imperial, Europan or colonial, man or woman : in the eyes of the Fiends of the Nameless City, they had all been food, nothing more. And in the end, the Fiends had been stopped by Imperial soldiers fighting to protect Kemetian civilians, because they too saw the Kemetians as their kin, however distant.

Niniane loved her country, she really did. But she wasn't blind to its faults, or perhaps it was more apt to say that she wasn't anymore. Her blinkers had started coming off in the Nameless City, and had completely been ripped off by Colonel Lergen's scathing-yet-polite rebuke. The Allied Kingdom had let its success at spreading its influence across the globe go to its head, and started to believe its own propaganda. Now its leaders were driving it to a war they couldn't win, didn't have to fight in the first place, and which would be waged with weapons whose potency made a mockery of all that had come before in Humanity's long and bloody history of warfare.

She wasn't sure what she should or could do about it. Fortunately, she had a few days to think about it and figure something out.

Chapter End Notes

AN : And with that, Lergen's inheriting Tanya's Misunderstanding Field is complete, although his version of it is arguably even stronger. I was wondering how to justify

keeping the Allied Kingdom in the war after what happened in Kemet, and then I realized that I had already set up things perfectly to convince the Round Table that they absolutely NEED to keep fighting in order to save the world from the ancient, malevolent, immortal wizard turning the Empire into his tool of world domination, whose name is Eric von Lergen.

I wondered how the Allied Kingdom could spin what happened in Kemet, and then I remembered that propaganda doesn't have to be even slightly based on reality and governments can just make stuff up. Which is how we ended up with this chapter's Londinium Times headlines. I've to remember that in the era this story takes place in, controlling the flow of information is a lot easier than it is nowadays.

Also, good news, everyone ! We have reached the point where the story starts moving without me telling it to. That last scene was absolutely not planned, but it ended up being written nonetheless. What does it mean for the future of Albion that Niniane has discovered the Path of Stars ? Who among the soldiers of Division Y (or the rest of the ISE, come to that) slipped her the pamphlet and why ? I have absolutely no idea ! Isn't that exciting ?

Lastly, I'm thinking about having General Romel, Colonel Lergen and the rest of the Imperial Southern Expedition writing a "thesis" of sorts, about the best ways to use the Wunderwaffen alongside standard troops. Any suggestions as to the contents of this new doctrine are welcome, but what I'm really looking for is a name for it. Specifically, I am looking for something ending in 'Krieg' (you know, like 'Blitzkrieg') with the first half of the word being a German word that fits the use of the Wunderwaffen. Mythoskrieg ? Wunderkrieg ? I don't know, which is why I'm asking for suggestions. After all, I already asked SB for a German translation for 'The Path of Stars', and I'm quite happy with 'Der Pfad der Sterne' that ended up being proposed.

In the next chapter, we will see what Operation Enigma is really about, and a new Projekt will be revealed : Projekt J. As always, I look forward to your thoughts, comments, and ideas.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : Colonel Eric von Lergen

Subject : Division Y recall

Date : November 30th, 1925

*Colonel,*

*As we discussed prior to your departure for the Southern Continent, the preparations for Operation Ragnarök are completed. It is time for you and the assets of Division Y deployed alongside the Southern Expedition to return to the Fatherland in order to take part in the first phase of the offensive.*

*Return to Galberj at once. The ship* Irene *and her escorts will await you there to carry your forces up the Francois coast so that you can link up with the rest of Operation Ragnarök's elements. Then, you will receive further orders.*

*Before the end of the year, these troublesome Albish shall be crushed once and for all, and the Empire's future shall be secured.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

From : Colonel Eric von Lergen

To : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

Subject : Orders received

Date : December 3rd, 1925

*General,*

*We have embarked aboard the* Irene *and are about to depart Galberj. We are expected to cross the Strait of Jabaltariq out of the Inner Sea in five days, and will link with Operation Ragnarök within the following week, barring unexpected weather.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*"New intelligence from Ultra indicates that the Imperials have a new plan in the works to end the war, codename 'Operation Ragnarök'. As part of it, Lergen and the Division Y contingent on the Southern Continent are returning home by sea : they will cross the Jabaltariq Strait and go up the Francois coast to meet up with the rest of the Operation's forces. Mister John has confirmed that the aerial mages of the Imperial expedition are still with Romel, so it will be just Lergen and Division Y's personnel onboard.*

*This is our chance to take Lergen out along with a huge chunk of Division Y's assets. His little display with the Nameless City's gateway has inadvertently told us that modern firepower can overcome even the power of Elder magic, and there are few things with more firepower than the guns on the Royal Navy's ships.*

*The super mage who took down the Heresiarch has to be relying on some Wunderwaffe spell, so the Kemetian wards should hold him at bay. To be honest, if they don't, then the war is already lost. Merlin tells me he has enough students able to deploy them for this, though they'll require mage support to properly protect something the size of a ship in the middle of the ocean (something about flowing water disrupting the energies of the ritual drawing on the relic's power). Fortunately, there is an old trick in the Royal Wizard's archives that allows them to draw on the mana reserves of other mages, and Merlin had figured out how to integrate it into the Kemetian ward ritual.*

*Admittedly, now that I've time to sleep on it, Merlin's theory about Colonel Lergen being an immortal wizard seeking to rule the Empire from the shadows sounds a bit less plausible than it did at our last meeting. However, even without that consideration, this is too big an opportunity to miss. The Imperials are aware of our Kemetian wards, so we've to assume this Operation Ragnarök involves some sort of counter, whether it's overpowering the relic or, I don't know, lifting up the bottom of the sea to create a land bridge for the Imperial Army."*

Private communication between Agravain and Kay, members of Albion's Round Table, December 4th, 1925.

---

*"Vice Admiral Cook,*

*We have uncovered intelligence suggesting the Imperials are pulling their Wunderwaffen out of the Southern Continent as part of a grand operation against Albion itself. Due to operational constraints, they will be moving at sea with a limited escort.*

*This is an unprecedented chance to land a blow against the Empire and show the world that they aren't as invincible as they pretend to be.*

*Your squadron is to move to the west of the Jabaltariq Strait and prepare for ambush as best as you think possible, and to destroy this convoy, with full priority being given to the transport ship* Irene.

*Do not, under any circumstances, engage the Imperial convoy during night-time. In addition, the mages who delivered this letter to you have been trained in the latest Albish magic, meant to counter the Imperial Wunderwaffen : make sure that they are prepared to enact it before moving to engage.*

*Do not attempt to seize the vessels or their contents, and if you end up taking prisoners, be extremely cautious. Should one Colonel Eric von Lergen be among the captives, it would be better for all of Europa if he were to have an unfortunate and tragic accident while being rescued.*

*Destroy this letter once you have confirmed your orders.*

*For King and Kingdom."*

Letter from the Admiralty of the Allied Kingdom to Vice Admiral Sebastian Cook, commanding officer of the Home Fleet's Second Squadron, delivered on December 5th, 1925.

---

*December 9th, 1925 – West of the Jabaltariq Strait*

Surrounded by water and the noise of engines, Lieutenant Krause carefully adjusted the last of the magnetic discs he had been given in place on the hull of the Albish ship.

Each of the twenty discs he had carried in the waterproof bag attached to his back had been assembled in the workshops of Castle Schwartzstein. About the length of a human hand, they were made of two parts : a metallic chassis with a magnetic charge to fix the whole to an enemy target, and a delicately carved discus of hardened clay, on which were inscribed sigils that made Krause's eyes itch when he looked at them in his human form. The discus was covered in reinforced glass to prevent accidentally damaging it, though Krause still had to be exceedingly careful.

Fortunately, the Major had made him train for this at length in the lake near the Castle, using dummy disks and hulls, until he could perform the manoeuvre to her satisfaction. This wasn't exactly what he had in mind when he had imagined his first deployment as the first of the Echo-type Werwölfe, but if everything worked as it should, then his actions would make a far greater impact on the war than if he had climbed aboard the ship and started killing everyone he came across.

With the last disc in place, he had marked all seven of the Allied Kingdom's ships, using more markers on the largest vessels just to be sure. Adjusting his position underwater, he let loose a series of brief sonar pulses in the direction where his instincts told him the closest of his kindred was located, signalling the success of the this part of Operation Enigma. The other Echo would then relay the message to the next one in line, who would then transmit it to the one waiting near the submarine that had brought them to this part of the ocean, who would telepathically transmit the confirmation to Lieutenant Grantz, standing in human form next to the Major.

It was somewhat convoluted, and certainly couldn't be used for detailed messages, but this method would ensure the Albish didn't have any warning. Even if they picked up his sonar pulses, they would think them the doing of some aquatic life-form, not realizing it actually heralded their doom.

Krause was tempted to stay here, to watch the glorious plan he had been briefed on unfold with his own eyes, and perhaps to add his teeth to the carnage to come. But his discipline as

an Imperial soldier was stronger than his bloodlust, so he started making his way back to the submarine. At least he could enjoy the swim : being in the open ocean was a lot different from the lake that was the only place available at the castle for him to indulge in the impulses that accompanied his new nature.

Not that he would ever complain about those, of course. He would have accepted a lot worse in exchange for the healing of the injuries he'd taken on the Western Front as a common grunt.

As he made his way back, a wave of something he couldn't describe washed over him. Glancing back, he saw rifts tear reality apart underneath the Kingdom's fleet, and from these rifts emerged things that resembled an octopus' tentacles in the same way Krause's own form resembled a shark.

Even the symbiont, the part of him that hadn't always been there, was made nervous by the sight. It wasn't like being near Major Degurechaff : her presence always filled Krause with a sense of respect that reminded him of witnessing one of the Empire's big artillery guns at rest – such awesome power, waiting to be unleashed on the enemies of the Fatherland. This, on the other hand, reminded him of the days he had spent cowering the trenches as enemy artillery rained down death upon them, praying that he wouldn't die this day to a God who must surely have turned away from the Rhine in disgust.

He had thought he'd left behind such fears when he had survived the Rite of Union and become the first Echo-type Werwolf, but it appeared the Major had yet again been right : there was always something left to fear.

---

*December 9th, 1925 – West of the Jabaltariq Strait – Bridge of the Second Squadron's flagship, battleship Mighty Hood*

To look upon Vice Admiral Sebastian Cook, you would never have guessed at the worry that had been gnawing at him since he had received his new orders from the Admiralty. He looked every bit the picture of the typical flag officer of the Royal Navy, prim and proper and completely in control. It was an image that he worked hard to project, as befitted someone given such a prestigious command as his.

The Second Squadron of the Home Fleet was a powerful force. Apart from *Mighty Hood*, his flagship and one of, if not the greatest ship of the Royal Navy, there was the carrier *Ark Royale* and the cruiser *Yliastral* as capital ships, accompanied by the destroyers *Bermuda*, *Lewis*, *Victor* and *Vincent*. With such vessels and their capable crews under his command, there was no conventional naval force that Cook feared to face, let alone those of a second-rate naval power like the Empire. To deal with a single transport ship and its three escorts, dispatching the Second Squadron was grossly overkill.

Except, of course, that the transport ship in question carried the leader of the infamous Imperial Army's Division Y, along with God alone knew what Wunderwaffen. And if there was one thing the Empire had made clear since the destruction of the Dacian Army, it was that the Wunderwaffen made a mockery of conventional wisdom in warfare.

"The naval mages just confirmed they've sighted the enemy convoy," reported one of the officers on the bridge of *Mighty Hood*. "Three frigates as escort and one transport ship, as expected."

"Good," he replied. "How long before they're in range of our guns ?"

"Ten minutes, sir."

"Put the gun crews on alert, then, and tell the mages to keep their distances and prepare to relay coordinates for long-range bombardment."

Cook's plan was to use the superior firepower of the Mighty Hood to send the entire convoy to the depths from afar, long before the escorts could retaliate, and only approach once all four ships had been sunk. He wasn't comfortable about the part of his orders that told him to execute the Imperial colonel supposedly on board the *Irene*, but hopefully he would die before the problem presented itself.

"Magical activity detected !" another officer suddenly shouted. "It's … it's coming for underneath us ?!"

"What ?!"

The deck shook under Cook's feet as the Mighty Hood responded to the sudden motion of the sea, and he caught himself on a railing to avoid failing. By random happenstance, this put him in the perfect position to look out through the viewport and see several towering things emerge from the water around the *Ark Royale*.

Even from this distance, the sheer size of the things meant that Cook could make out far more detail than he was comfortable with. Black and purple scales, the color of starless night and bruised skin. Rows of enormous yellow eyes with 8-shaped pupils. Suckers that must be larger than a man, and mouths filled with too many teeth.

It took several seconds before his brain managed to overcome the sheer size and horror of the things and realize that those were tentacles of some sort, and by the time he'd come to that realization the towers of monstrous flesh had closed around the *Ark Royale* and broken it to pieces, its structure ravaged by several explosions as its machinery was pulverized by the destruction around it.

There was a beat of complete, horrified silence on the bridge, broken only by the sounds of destruction and the distant screams of the *Ark Royale*'s unfortunate crew. Then Cook's officer training and survival instincts kicked in, and he shouted :

"Contact the mages in the hold ! Tell them to deploy the wards, now ! Relay that order to all remaining ships !"

Inside the hull, a storage chamber had been cleared for the use of the mages who had delivered his orders. Arranging it had been a headache and a half (there was never enough space available on a military ship), but as a golden sphere expanded to surround the *Mighty Hood*, Cook was grateful they had made the effort. His gratefulness redoubled when the

tentacles that had dragged the Ark to the depths re-emerged around his flagship and slammed against the shimmering golden sphere, before recoiling, sizzling at the contact, filling the air with an overpowering stench that made the Vice Admiral gag.

"It's working," whispered someone. "Thank God …"

"Continue our advance !" Cook ordered. "The Imperials' Wunderwaffe may have failed to take us all out, but I intend to avenge *Ark Royale* !"

"Yes, sir !" came the reply, and the Mighty Hood resumed her advance, although at a diminished speed, her engines struggling against the tentacles pressing on her shields. Cook wasn't sure how the physics of the whole thing worked, but it seemed that even with the wards protecting the ship, the Imperial Wunderwaffe could still slow them down.

He prepared to order the rest of the squadron to break formation and advance ahead of the Mighty Hood, but before he could speak, another alarmed cry rose up :

"Magical signatures approaching ! They are – God, they are going so fast !"

"How many ?" he barked.

"I … three, sir ! They are going too fast for our naval mages to intercept !"

Just three ? What could three mages accomplish against an entire squadron of the Royal Navy ?

Moments later, spells Cook didn't recognize bombarded the ward, making it shudder, but it held fast. That was strange : he hadn't been told the wards could block spells in addition to Wunderwaffen. Surely the Imperials hadn't found a way to make mage-portable superweapons ?

"The enemy mages have made it through the envelope !"

"Brace for impact !" Cook shouted, steadying himself for the ship to shake as the Imperial mages fired explosive formulas, but nothing happened. A second later, a slight tremor ran through the vessel's superstructure.

"What's happening ? Where are they ?" he asked.

"They are … they are inside, sir !" replied the man at the magic detector, sounding as surprised as Cook felt. "They have boarded us !"

Boarding ?! In this day and age ?!

Wait, Cook realized. Aerial mages were still a relatively new addition the armed forces. In the Navy, they were mostly used for reconnaissance and to provide fire support akin to bombing planes. But now that he thought about it, the tactic made sense. Aerial mages were incredibly lethal in close quarters, and the insides of a modern ship were very enclosed indeed.

And their target was obvious, Cook realized, feeling as if a cold hand was tightening around his heart.

"Recall all the naval mages we have ! Tell them to protect the mages casting the shield ! We cannot afford to have their work interrupted !"

It was the correct decision, the only decision, but it was too late. Panicked reports from the crew painted a grim picture of the three Imperial mages tearing through them in close-quarters, going straight for the ritual chamber. They must be able to detect the mana emanating from it, and while the plans of the *Mighty Hood* weren't public there were maps on the walls to help guide the sailors (and it wasn't as if the interior walls of the ship could do much to stop a determined aerial mage).

The moment the ward around Mighty Hood collapsed, the Imperial mages took off again. Cook saw them split up on the magic detector's screen, each of them moving fast, so fast, as they flew toward the other ships of his command. Then he didn't have time to look, as the tentacles that had been held at bay by the ward returned with a vengeance.

Quickly, Cook made a calculation. It had taken less than five minutes for the Imperial mages to disable the *Mighty Hood*'s arcane protections. Assuming it took them as much time for every ship in his squadron – perhaps more, if they knew what was coming – then there was still a way to salvage this.

"All ships, advance !" he ordered. "Take down the *Irene* at any cost ! This is our only chance to stop their Wunderwaffe !"

It was a gamble. For all he knew, the tentacles wouldn't go away with the sinking of the *Irene*, and he might instead end up unleashing this horror upon the seas with no one to control it. But it was the only thing he could do. Besides, it wasn't as if the beast was invincible. The Vice Admiral could see that they were hurting it : vast chunks of slimy flesh were being blasted off by canon fire and firearms, sending offal into the churning waters. But while a few tentacles were too damaged to continue and vanished underwater, there were too many of them, and those successes were too few.

He wanted to tell his crew to abandon ship, but all that would accomplish would be getting them in the water with that thing. Seconds later, the entire ceiling of the bridge was ripped off, and one of the tentacles loomed over them, before suddenly descending.

With his teeth bared in a defiant smile, Vice Admiral Sebastian Cook drew his ceremonial saber and pistol, and prepared to die with all the dignity expected of an officer of His Majesty's Royal Navy.

---

*"This is* Yliastral *to anyone listening ! The entire second squadron is lost !* Mighty Hood *has sunk, Cook is dead ! The Imps have killed the mages and the wards are down ! They have called the Kraken from the depths – OH GOD ! AAAAARGH –"*

Last radio transmission from the *Yliastral*, received by the Londinium Admiralty on December 9th, 1925.

*December 9th, 1925 – West of the Jabaltariq Strait – Imperial Submarine U-152*

I stood atop the U-152 as it held its position at the surface and watched the end of the Royal Navy's squadron. We were too far from the action for much to be visible, but thanks to the side-effects of Kosmosblut, I could still sense the energies of what we had unleashed against the Kingdom's fleet. Combined with the radio transmissions I was listening to, I had a pretty clear picture of the situation.

The last Albish ship floating was the destroyer *Vincent*, and it was rapidly taking water from multiple hull breaches. Her captain had been the one to broadcast his surrender as the last commanding officer left in the Royal Navy squadron.

Between the moment I had given the order to dismiss Projekt J right after receiving that transmission and the disappearance of the last tentacle, over five minutes had passed. I couldn't know how many more people had died during that interval, but I knew the number wouldn't be small. Legally, I was in the clear – we were at war, and I had moved to stop hostile action the moment they had announced their surrender – but the whole thing still left a foul taste in my mouth. Or maybe that was the magical emanations of Projekt J messing with my senses.

The *Irene*'s escorts were moving in toward the wreckage of the Royal Navy fleet in order to rescue the survivors, as demanded by the laws of war and sea. The fact that they had tried to kill each other moments ago yet were now pushing their engines to reach them as fast as possible in order to aid them was yet another testament to the absurdity and illogical nature of warfare. Although in this case, there were more practical reasons for intervening : every sailor of the Allied Kingdom we took prisoner was one more bargaining piece in our dealings with Albion, and one less source of intel the Kingdom could use once their own rescue arrived.

Of the thousands of sailors who had crewed the seven Albish ships, only a fraction had survived, so there should be enough space aboard the escorts to keep them, if barely. They would be off-loaded at the first captured Francois port that came into view, once the convoy was past the Ispagna coastline. Colonel Lergen and all the assets of Division Y aboard the convoy would also disembark there, making the rest of their trip using the railroad. It was unlikely the John Bulls would try a naval attack again after what had happened this time, but not impossible.

I nodded to myself, satisfied that this, the most important and risky phase of Operation Enigma, had gone off without a hitch, and turned to look at my companions still standing atop the submarine.

The team of occultists that had activated Projekt J were being carried down into the submarine to recover from their efforts, while the platform we had constructed atop the submarine's structure so that they would have enough space was being dismantled, the pieces carried back inside.

Lieutenants Krause and Grantz stood at my side. Grantz was here because he was acting as Visha's temporary replacement as my bodyguard and assistant (as well as relaying the

telepathic messages of the Echoes to me), Krause because he had wanted to watch the result of his work and I hadn't wanted to risk him slipping back into the water to get a closer look if I refused.

I addressed the last member of my small retinue, who was wearing the uniform of an Imperial aerial mage :

"It looks like there'll be no need for us to sortie today. Let's go back inside, Zerayah."

"Yes, madam !" the coal-skinned mage replied with a somewhat-sloppy salute, her words still heavily accented but perfectly understandable. Her language lessons were going well, I was pleased to see.

Zerayah had been among the Nazzadi who had witnessed my fight against Akhar-Zegog. She had been the leader of her tribe at the time, despite looking like she was barely in her twenties if that (although I guessed I couldn't exactly comment on that given my own apparent age) and as a result was one of my most fervent supporters among the Nazzadi (although it must be said that all of them were still embarrassingly grateful for the somewhat sparse accommodations I'd arranged for them in Castle Schwartzstein). Zerayah had taken to flying with admirable swiftness, ending up leader of the flight of Nazzadi mages who had met my standards in time for Operation Enigma.

She was also, not to put too fine a point on it, absolutely gorgeous, with her her flaming red hair and black skin making her look very good in her military uniform. Since we had come aboard, the sailors had been sneaking glances at her almost continuously, and I was certain it wasn't just because of her exotic coloring. Everyone had stayed professional, though, as they damn well ought to be as part of the Imperial warmachine.

If Zerayah felt any disappointment at not seeing action, she hid it well. But then, considering why I had brought her and her flight along with me, that only made sense. The only way they would have seen combat would have been if something had gone catastrophically wrong with Projekt J, after all.

One of the things we had discovered once we'd started to overcome the language barrier was that, to the Nazzadi, human life was incredibly precious. They were all used to fighting the various beasts that had lurked in their ruined homeworld, but inter-tribes conflict had been all but extinct, due to them spending generations on the cusp of extinction. The few disagreements that couldn't be resolved amicably had instead been taken care of through ritual combat that always – always – ended before anyone was hurt too badly.

As a result, they had an incredibly powerful cultural taboo against taking another's life. You might think that the same was true in Europa, but that was far from the case : in this nationalism-infested era, everyone was taught more or less from childhood that killing the enemies of your country was a good and even glorious thing. Simple human nature meant that it still took a lot of training before most soldiers were actually able to pull the trigger on another human being, but the cultural pressure was actually on the side of the killing, since not being willing to kill the enemy was perceived as moral cowardice.

Hell, the Nazzadi language didn't even have a word for 'war'. Several of them had gone through a mental breakdown when they had been told about the Great War the Empire was fighting and had finally internalized what they were being told. To these people, who had lived all their lives in the rubble of an apocalypse, us being willing to kill each other in such grotesque numbers for concepts like country or honor was madness. It would probably take years before they could begin to understand the motives behind the Great War.

I was self-aware enough to know that, as Director of Division Y, I had done many morally questionable things. But I had to draw the line at teaching the last remnants of a lost civilization that looked up to me as some kind of savior figure that murder was okay. I didn't know what scared me the most : that my influence on them wouldn't be strong enough to get them to overcome their taboo and they would revolt, or that it would be, and the last shred of innocence of the Nazzadi people would be destroyed by my hands. I wasn't sentimental, but I refused to be a hypocrite, and such a thing would end my ability to ever consider myself a peace-loving individual again.

Fortunately, that reticence didn't extend to anything that clearly wasn't human, so the Nazzadi mages could still be deployed as security for Castle Schwartzstein against rogue experiments. And if the situation in Kemet repeated itself and more ancient monsters were let loose, the Nazzadi would be more than willing to help prevent a repeat from what had happened to Nazza-Duhni. Which was why I had brought Zerayah and her team with me : in case Projekt J went out of control, I wanted to have options that didn't involve using the vial of Kosmosblut I carried with me.

Of course, I didn't need Kosmosblut to be able to fight : I'd had plenty of time to practice with my walking stick, and I was confident there wasn't another mage on the planet who could match me. But with my right forearm covered and my eyes kept hidden by thick glasses, I was constantly aware that, while I had kept my sanity, my body had still paid the price of my use of powers beyond mortal ken. That was why I hadn't joined Weiss, Neumann and König in their attack on the Albish fleet. If the occultists had lost control of Projekt J and the Nazzadi had been deployed, I would have flown alongside them to cut down that tentacled horror down to size and send it scrambling back to whatever dimension we'd dragged it out of.

As we made our way back inside the U-152, I let my mind drift back to just what we'd just accomplished and how many different things had come together to make it possible. Projekt J, [Jörmungandr], had only become practical to use with the discovery of the Echo-type Werwölfe. Without them to put the calling sigils in place, we would have been forced to either rely on the handful of Untoten still capable of operating over running water or unleash the Projekt without any clear targets, which would have been incredibly dangerous given that we needed to be close for the summoning ritual to work.

Given what the Projekt looked like, I had considered calling it Projekt C, [Cthulhu], but nobody would have understood the reference. If there was a Lovecraft analogue in this world, he hadn't published his stories yet (and even if he did, I vaguely remembered his work hadn't really taken off until long after his death). Come to think of it, if such a man existed, I wondered how the existence of magic in general and the Wunderwaffen in particular would affect his writing. That would be something to look into, once this stupid war was over.

Back to the subject at hand, we had confirmed that the Kemetian wards could block the Mythos spells loaded in the D-24, and even prevented the computation orb from functioning at all while within their area of effect. To be sure the same thing wouldn't happen to Weiss, and as funny as the mental image of him going through the ward only to be stopped dead in his tracks when his right arm hit the shield, his new replacement arm wasn't made from the same material as the previous one but mundane metal instead. It wasn't as responsive, and Professor Gehrman had grumbled about working with inferior materials, but I had managed to convince him it was necessary, and Weiss had known better than to complain. In any case, he would switch to a proper replacement once we were back home.

Unfortunately for the Albish, I had anticipated that possibility, and made sure each of the mages I had brought with me was equipped with another computation orb : the D-25. Another derivative of Projekt D, the D-25 was the result of our efforts to create a dual-core orb that didn't rely on the Mythos arcanotech that had gone into building the Denkmaschine. After confirming the D-24 was being blocked by the Kemetian wards, Weiss and the others had switched to the D-25 and had gone straight through the wards to take out the Kingdom's mages responsible for keeping them up. Just like I had hoped when I had ordered the production of a set of D-25s for every mage involved in this operation, the Kemetian wards hadn't affected them at all.

Sending three mages against an entire squadron might have looked reckless, and it was. But even without the Mythos spells loaded in the second core, the D-25 was an incredible improvement on standard Imperial computation orbs, let alone the inferior stuff the Albish mages were using. And the enemy ships had been badly shaken by the sight of Projekt J, all their attention understandably focused on the monstrous tentacles trying to pierce through their golden shields, meaning there had been little anti-air fire aimed their way. Even then, it had been a close thing, and the three of them had come back exhausted and injured, barely able to land before collapsing and being carried to the submarine's infirmary, where we'd managed to get a medical mage to help with the operation despite how rare and valuable those were.

After today's field testing, I was confident Brigadier General Zettour would ask that we share the design with the real orb manufacturers of the Imperial Army – once we had finished the rest of Operation Enigma and there wasn't any chance of the Allied Kingdom intercepting it, of course. Unlike the rest of Division Y's creations, the D-25 could be produced outside of the Division without risking a Mythos outbreak.

Still, even without the Mythos element, using a dual-core orb was very different from using a single-core one. I'd managed it without too much effort, probably thank to still having the adaptable brain of a child, but it had taken considerable training before those three had gotten the hang of it. It was possible the Empire wouldn't be able to spare the time to re-train its mages into the use of the new device, no matter how much more effective it was. Perhaps once the war was over ? At least the lengthier training required to use a dual-core orb to its full potential would help convince the Empire that a fully-professional army was the way to go, rather than the conscript-relying one we had right now.

Inside the U-152, I went back to my cabin, which was as cramped as everything ever was on a submarine, where space was at a premium. To make space for the additional personnel and

materiel we had brought with us, the U-152 had been stripped of all its usual complement of torpedoes, meaning the submarine had been essentially defenceless during the journey – well, except for the mages, Werwölfe, and me being aboard … alright, it hadn't been defenceless at all. Still, I was glad nobody had tried to kill us while we made our way from the northern port where we'd embarked to the west of Jabaltariq.

During our trip, I had taken the opportunity to familiarize myself with the submarine technology available to the Empire. To be blunt, it wasn't great. Apart from only being able to submerge for limited periods of time, the weapons of our submarine fleet were frankly appalling, much to the sailors' frustrations. Once I had managed to get him talking, Captain von Schraft had ranted about the torpedoes' failure to properly detonate, and cursed the scientists who had built them and who continued to insist they worked perfectly fine during lab tests, somehow blaming the soldiers for failing to recreate their exact testing conditions on the battlefield.

I had been shocked to hear it. That, at least, was one issue we didn't have in Division Y : I had forced it through the thick skulls of the madmen under my command that practicality was paramount when developing new Projekte or applications of existing ones, second only to reliability. It might diminish the amount of wholesale destruction we were able to inflict, but that was a problem that could be overcome with proper application of the tools at our disposal – and Division Y had plenty of wonderful tools, with more being added regularly as our work continued.

We had been lucky enough to get three new Echoes during our last performance of the Rite of Union, on the three nights of the full moon at the end of October. Resource constraints had forced us to skip the prior full moon at the start of that month, and again in November (once every two full moons seemed to be the way things would go in the future, unless our supply of rare reagents was improved). This time, forty-nine candidates had survived : apart from the Echoes, we had twenty Phantom-types, seventeen Mirage-types, three Shadow-types, a pair of Spectres, another Whisper (proving Captain Uger wouldn't be the only one), and no less than three new manifestations.

The Nightmare-type lived up to its name, I was forced to admit. Taller than most other Werwölfe, he didn't have a head, instead having an uneven distribution of eyes on his upper torso, between two enormous shoulders that could split open to fire streams of crimson energy bullets like a heavy-caliber machine-gun, which could be focused into a single, all-consuming beam of pure destruction, leading to the type's classification as a Heavy Weapons Werwolf. In addition, his too-long arms ended in vicious talons, and his palms could split open to reveal tentacles capable of incredible crushing force. All in all, the Nightmare-type would be the uncontested scariest variant of all Werwölfe, if not for the other two new types that had been discovered in the latest round of Rites of Union.

The Efreet-type could be summed up in one word, and that word was 'fire'. This variant of Werwolf looked like a lava golem that left burning footprint wherever he walked and set anything he touched on fire. He could breath metal-melting fire, had two enormous fists that could pummel through concrete and tank armor with equal ease, and the ability to summon a supernatural rain of burning meteors on his immediate surroundings. The Efreet-type would never see action in any kind of mission requiring stealth, but I couldn't imagine there were

many armed forces on the planet that would be willing to stand their ground before his advance.

And then there was the Widow-type, which I was reasonably certain would have ended up with another name entirely if its sole representative at the moment hadn't ended up being one of the few women who were part of Projekt W. For all its claims of egalitarianism, the Empire's military was still predominantly male, with the sole exception being the mage corps. The violent nature of mage combat meant that it was rare for one of them to end up with the kind of injuries that qualified for selection in Projekt W : either they were patched up by medical mages as a priority, or they were dead. But this one had managed to survive with truly horrific injuries : before Projekt W, I was sure she would have been quietly killed in the hospital to end her suffering. Instead, Corporal Karla Vogt had been restored with the new ability to transform into a frankly terrifying spider-like horror.

The Widow's body was covered in a black, shining carapace, with little tufts of hair at the joints and two enormous, pupiless eyes set in a face straight out of an arachnophobe's nightmares. Unique among the Werwölfe, the Widow could alter her shape further after transforming, growing an additional pair of long, thin legs that tripled her movement speed. Her upper limbs were spinnerets that could fire webbing with enough strength to punch through armor, and could then be used to entrap almost anything. The strength of that webbing reminded me of a certain friendly neighbourhood comic book hero of my old world, although I doubted Marvel had ever published anything like the Widow.

Then there was the Widow's bite, which injected a disorienting toxin that, combined with the webbing, made the Widow uniquely suited for capture operations. Her ultimate attack, tested on animals, involved trapping a victim into a shell of webbing that either incapacitated them in moments or dissolved their body completely, letting the Widow feed on their liquefied remnants (which Corporal Vogt didn't seem to find off-putting at all, leading me to believe the mental alterations of this particular type were more pronounced than most).

All in all, these three new types of Werwölfe promised to be very useful, each in their own way. Still, I was hoping we wouldn't need to deploy any of them in this war.

In the grand scheme of things, the loss of a single naval squadron wasn't that big of a blow to the Allied Kingdom. Their navy had dozens more vessels, even if they also had a lot more of the world's waters to cover in order to maintain their oversea empire.

But the *Mighty Hood* was something of a symbol to the Royal Navy. She had been the greatest warship of the Royal Navy, and arguably the most powerful vessel to ever sail the waves in this world. Now it was a wreck rapidly sinking to the bottom of the ocean, a grave for hundreds of sailors, waiting for future explorers to come plunder it for historical relics.

Until now, the Allied Kingdom's government had been able to claim that its navy ruled the waves. There was no way for the Imperial Navy to break through the naval defenses surrounding Albion, and our Wunderwaffen had been thwarted by the Kemetian ward.

This was the goal of Operation Enigma, as designed by Brigadier General Zettour. Using Colonel Lergen and the elements of Division Y aboard the *Irene* as bait, we had inflicted an utterly one-sided defeat on the Royal Navy.

The Allied Kingdom wouldn't know exactly what had happened to its squadron, of course. It was possible that the Albish had detected the U-152's presence and reported it back to their headquarters before they sunk, but all that would mean was that, in the eyes of their Admiralty, a transport ship, three escorts and a submarine had utterly destroyed an entire squadron. They might also know that their wards had worked, but had been disabled by our own, superior mages.

Hopefully, they would see the implications for the rest of their Home Fleet. Making more discs to draw the attention of Projekt J was relatively easy, and while the actual ritual was taxing the occultists would recover with a few days of rest. Getting the discs into place without the benefit of having drawn the enemy into a trap would be harder – the Echoes could swim fast and for prolonged periods of time, but even they would struggle to catch up to a warship, and the ocean was vast – but far from impossible if Division Y worked in tandem with the Empire's submarine fleet.

The John Bulls couldn't defeat us on land; they couldn't defeat us at sea; and their infiltration of our communications would soon end. Unless they wanted their Commonwealth to be reduced to one city permanently covered by a magic dome, they had no choice but to come at the negotiation table and end this stupid war once and for all.

At least, that was the hope of Zettour and Central Command. I couldn't help but think that surely Being X wouldn't let us get away with it so easily.

Chapter End Notes

AN : And here, after Osfjord, the Rhine, and the Southern Continent, we have this timeline's equivalent of the sinking of the Second Squadron of the Royal Navy. In canon, this happens in volume 9 after being teased in the Andrew's sections early on, off the coast of Dakar. Obviously there is no Wunderwaffen involved there ... although come to think of it, I suppose Schugel's inventions might qualify for that name.

Jabaltariq is, of course, Not!Gibraltar. I came up with the alternative name after reading the Wikipedia page for the region.

I initially planned to have the Nazzadi take a more active part in the battle, essentially playing the part of Weiss, Neumann and König, but then I realized that given how few of them were left on their homeworld, it was likely none of them had ever killed someone before, leading to the whole taboo aspect being elaborated on. And yes, I'm aware that most depictions of post-apocalyptic society show a callous disregard for human life being prevalent. But I don't believe in that interpretation of human nature, because evil is a bad surviving strategy in the long term. No doubt there were Nazzadi willing to kill others in the immediate aftermath of their civilization's collapse, but by the time Tanya found them, generations later, that sort of attitude had completely died down. Is that naive of me ? Maybe, but it's my story, so there. And don't worry, the Nazzadi will definitely see action one way or another before this story ends ... in fact, if

things go as I've planned (which is far from guaranteed given how this story has gone so far) it should happen very soon.

Also, readers of my other stories might have recognized the name of Zerayah. I promise you its use here doesn't mean anything sinister. Whether you believe me or not is up to you.

As Tanya mentioned, this victory is more important for what it represents than what it accomplished (although such one-sided destruction isn't anything to be scoffed at, and the surviving Albish sailors certainly won't ever forget it). If you are annoyed that the Empire seems to be constantly fighting with a hand tied behind its back, remember that hand isn't a hand so much as it is a nest of tentacles summoned from the Outer Dark that suck out the souls of the enemies of the Reich under an eldritch sky. Zettour very much doesn't want to escalate if he can at all help it, so the goal of Operation Enigma is to show the Allied Kingdom that there is no possible way for them to win so that they'll sue for peace and everyone can go home (once the Empire has secured some sizable concessions from the Kingdom, of course, because come on).

Unfortunately, he doesn't know about the Round Table's theory concerning Lergen, and Operation Enigma certainly won't do anything to dispel the image of the good Colonel as a sorcerous mastermind. Next chapter will be mostly about the next steps of Operation Enigma and the fallout of Projekt J's deployment.

To clarify, the D-25 is basically the Type-97 Elenium Computation Orb from canon, except instead of using the holy relic of the Type-95 as inspiration the engineers used the D-24, which is anything but holy. Using a dual-core orb effectively is definitely harder than a single-core one in canon, and if you think I made the trio who used them overpowered, please remember how devastatingly powerful the 203rd is in canon, especially during its first deployments.

Also, after several requests, I relented and added the rarer Tager types to the gacha, resulting in the results you see here. I'm not sure if I mentioned it before, but after messing up with the dates earlier, I've decided that Division Y can only perform the sized-up Rite of Union once every two full moons. Here are the updated drop rates :

Common (Mirage, Phantom) : 80%

Specialist (Echo, Shadow, Spectre, Whisper) : 17%

Exceptional (Nightmare, Vampire) : 2%

Rare (Efreet, Widow) : 1%

Still no Vampire, I know. I was pretty glad with the three Echoes Tanya pulled, though : it certainly helped for this chapter.

That's all for now. As usual, I look forward to your thoughts and suggestions for this story.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*GREAT NAVAL VICTORY AGAINST THE ALLIED KINGDOM !*

*Since the crushing defeat of their forces at Al-Alamein, the Allied Kingdom has kept its troops far from the reach of the Imperial Army, content to instead rely upon the might of its Navy to wage its unprovoked war against our glorious Reich. For too long, the Empire has been forced to concede to the Allied Kingdom's supremacy on the waves, but that time is over.*

*Two days ago, to the West of the Jabaltariq Strait which marks the entrance to the Inner Sea, the might of the Empire's Wunderwaffen was demonstrated once more. An entire squadron of the Royal Navy, which sought to attack a convoy carrying troops back home from our expedition on the Southern Continent, soon learned that convoy was far from as defenseless as it first appeared. Through the deployment of yet another new Wunderwaffe designed by our Fatherland's greatest minds, the entire squadron was sunk, including the Mighty Hood, renowned across the seven seas as the greatest warship of her age.*

*This is the single greatest naval victory ever won by the Reich, and heralds the end of ever-arrogant Albion's self-proclaimed dominion over the seas. Combined with our earlier triumphs against the Allied Kingdom's armies at Al-Alamein, and the seizure of the Suan Canal by the Imperial Southern Expedition, the final victory of the Empire is clearly inevitable ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Berun Post*, December 11th, 1925.

---

*"Friends,*

*Do not believe the lies that you've been told. The Home Fleet's Second Squadron did not fall in heroic battle against vastly superior numbers of the Imperial Navy, taking down scores of enemy ships in a brave last stand.*

*No, Mighty Hood and her sisters were sunk by yet another of the Empire's terrible arcane weapons, while attempting to sink a convoy carrying back Imperial soldiers who'd fought in the defense of Kheriaha, against monsters unleashed by our own country's short-sighted rulers, desperate for any advantage in their endless pursuit of supremacy.*

*The Imperials called forth a great beast from the depths, and all the might of Albion was as nothing against it. Thousands of Albion's sons died in vain, unable to fight back, unable to do anything at all to alter their fate. And for what ? Because the Lords of Parliament do not want for the Empire to grow stronger ? Because any Europan country daring to go against their plans for the continent to remain disunited and set against itself must be crushed, so that they might maintain their power, prestige and wealth ?*

*How many more must die under the incompetent leadership of the House and Parliament, before it is enough ?"*

Excerpt from an anti-war pamphlet circulating across Londinium, confiscated by law enforcement on December 12th, 1925.

---

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : The Allied Kingdom's Cryptography Department

Subject : Peace talks

Date : December 11th, 1925

*Greetings, gentlemen.*

*As you have probably guessed from this message's recipient, we are aware that you have broken our codes. My congratulations to your cryptography department : I have personally spoken with our own experts, and they told me that the only way you could have done it would be through considerable effort, even taking into account the weaknesses in our procedures that, I assure you, will be corrected forthwith. This will be the last of our wireless transmissions you are able to decipher, and hopefully the last one you need to.*

*By now, you will have learned of the fate of your attempt to attack Division Y at sea as it returned from the Southern Continent. Yes, this was a trap we laid using our knowledge that you had broken our codes. The survivors of your lost ships' crew are in our custody, and shall be granted all the protections afforded to captured enemy soldiers by the laws of war. At the same time, I want you to know that the Wunderwaffen that were used to annihilate these ships are still perfectly functioning and can be used again and again if necessary, until every single vessel of your Royal Navy lies at the bottom of the ocean, a tomb for the brave sailors crewing it. And without that Navy, there will be nothing to stop us from landing troops on your mainland; troops that will not be affected by the spells you plundered from Kemet in order to protect your capital from our Wunderwaffen.*

*Yet such is not my and the rest of the Imperial General Staff's intent, if we can at all avoid it. Despite the cowardly and unlawful manner in which the Allied Kingdom joined it, the continuation of this war is in neither of our nations' interest, and I believe we have conclusively proven that if it continues, it will be only end in the Empire's victory.*

*In the coming days, our diplomats will reach out to yours in order to begin discussions for an armistice, to be followed by a proper peace conference and treaty. As a gesture of good will, should you accept the offer of an armistice, we will remove our expedition from Kemet and free the Suan Canal.*

*It is my most sincere hope that this war can be ended by Christmas.*

*For the Fatherland.*

---

*December 12th, 1925 – Londinium*

"Well," said Kay feelingly, "we're fucked."

It was, perhaps, beneath a man of his station and breeding to swear so crassly. But if ever a situation had warranted profanity, it was this one.

"It could be worse," said Mordred with a bitter smile. "The Navy could have been completely destroyed, the Imperial Army could have landed, and we could be running for our lives while Londinium burns around us."

"Yes, thank you, Mordred, for reminding us that things can always get worse," snarled Kay with an unamused glare at his colleague.

"What the situation in the armed forces ?" asked Agravain before things could devolve further.

"The Admiralty is in an uproar," replied Kay, visibly forcing himself to calm down. "The loss of the Mighty Hood hit us bad, and the fact it was so one-sided only made it worse. The fact that we told Cook the countermeasures would protect his ships from the Wunderwaffen has spread, and it hasn't exactly painted us in a good light. I only barely avoided losing my position altogether, and that was probably because nobody wanted to give more fodder to the rabble-rousers making a spectacle of themselves in the streets."

Several hundred people had taken to the streets of the capital, publicly mourning the loss of Albish lives, but really making their anger clear.

"They aren't protesting against the war itself. At least not openly," Agravain swiftly added. "There are plenty who are opposed to it in private, make no mistake. But these protests are against the way this war has been conducted so far." Left unsaid was the fact that they could hardly be blamed for that. "So far, we have managed to keep the details of the defeat at Al-Alamein from spreading. The fact that army was made up mostly of colonials has helped, but the crews of the Second Squadron were Albion-born. They have families and friends here, and they aren't happy. The Yliastral's last message wasn't encrypted : dozens of amateurs picked it up across the country."

And no amount of propaganda claiming the last stand of Mighty Hood and her squadron had been a heroic struggle against impossible odds would be able to silence the rumors. If the battleship had been sunk by conventional means, then the blow to morale could've been managed by avenging her, no matter the cost – but unfortunately, that option was closed to them. They had no idea where the *Irene* had gone after its crushing victory, and even if they somehow learned its exact location and heading at this moment, what they were supposed to do ? Send another squadron after it ?

"How long ago do you think the Imperials figured out we'd cracked their codes ?" asked Mordred.

"Probably when they targeted Londinium with their Wunderwaffen," replied Agravain. "Not that we'd much of a choice : if Merlin hadn't blocked their attack, we'd have lost there and

then."

"In hindsight, the trap seems all too obvious," muttered Kay. "I mean, 'Operation Ragnarök' ? A little on the nose, don't you think ? And right after Division Y and the Southern Expedition moved on Kemet without us being forewarned, to boot. We were too arrogant. We thought there was no way they would catch on that we'd broken their codes."

"It's not like we had a choice," argued back Agravain. "If it hadn't been a trap, then not doing anything would have been a gross dereliction of our duties to the Kingdom. And we know the Wunderwaffen are capable of impossible things, so we had to take that message seriously."

"Speaking of what the Wunderwaffen can do, could the Imperials do what they did to the squadron here ?" asked Mordred nervously. "Use their mages to disable the wards and then unleash their Wunderwaffen on the city again ?"

"Not here," replied Kay firmly. "We have built up Londinium's defenses against such a scenario since the reveal of the first computation orb. There are anti-air defenses and magical detectors all around the city, and Londinium is entirely covered by the detection arrays. If the Imps can manage to break into Merlin's tower and disable the wards, then they have already won, Wunderwaffen or not. The other sites we marked for protection, now that's another story. They're all protected against raids, of course, but not to the same extant."

"There is another issue," pointed out Agravain. "Last time, we had warning that the Imperials were about to target the capital, which gave Merlin time to activate the wards. That will no longer be the case."

"They won't strike at Londinium while they're hoping for us to start negotiating, I don't think," weighed Kay with a thoughtful expression. "The Imperials have something of a blind spot where the reactions of other countries are concerned, but they must know such an attack would only cement our determination to fight to the bitter end, not cow us with fear. If it becomes clear we've no intention to negotiate, however … Merlin, how long could you and your apprentices protect Londinium constantly ?"

Sat in his chair, the Royal Wizard looked grief-stricken. Some of the mages trained in the Kemetian wards who had been sent to the squadron's assistance had been his apprentices for years, the others having been drafted from the Kingdom's aerial mages to be given an express course into using them. Given the Yliastral's last, desperate message, it was unlikely any of them had survived to be taken prisoner. Still, he pulled himself together to answer Kay's question :

"For Londinium itself, we could keep the wards up for months if necessary. However, repelling the Empire's last strike took a toll on me : if Division Y strikes repeatedly, I do not know whether their strength would run out first or ours."

"We may not be defenseless thank to the wards," said Agravain, "but I'm going to be brutally honest and say it : I don't think we can fight the Empire in the field. Not alone, at least."

"Churbull is still willing to fight, bless his stubborn heart," said Mordred. "But even he cannot stand against the rest of Parliament alone. It's one thing to be ready to fight to the

bitter end when you think victory is certain, and the war will be waged on another country's soil. It's quite another to hold onto that dedication when your side faces defeat after defeat. Once word of Zettour's offer spreads – and make no mistake, it will spread, inevitably, once we share it with the Prime Minister – then there will be many who'll call for us to accept, if only to bring this war to an end while we still have a sliver of pride left."

"This isn't our only option, though. The mobilization of our forces is complete on the mainland, and we have a lot more troops ready in the colonies," said Kay. "If the Imperials try to land on Albion, we'll give them a hell of a fight. To help in that, we should move as many of the colonial divisions here as we can, even if it means taking the longer road around the Southern Continent. We'll need all the warm bodies we can get if the Imperial Army manages to secure a beachhead."

How swiftly the tide turned, they all silently thought. Not so long ago, the very thought of a foreign army making it through the defensive screen of the Royal Navy to reach Albion had been laughable. Now, the pride of the Allied Kingdom's fleets had been annihilated without sinking a single enemy ship in her final engagement.

"Kay," asked Mordred, "what do we know about this 'Kraken' the Imperials unleashed ?"

"The scouts' reports before it all went to hell were clear that the Imperials didn't have anything besides the convoy in the area," replied Kay. "They must have detected the squadron's approach somehow – if they knew it was coming, it wouldn't be that difficult."

"So it might be that they needed the unique circumstances of a trap for it to work," deduced Agravain. "Or this was a first deployment of something recently developed by Division Y since we joined the war, and they wanted to test it under semi-controlled conditions."

"Maybe," said Merlin, his doubt obvious. When the others turned to look at him quizzically, he elaborated : "while it is certainly possible Division Y brought the means to unleash this Kraken with them, it is also possible that Lergen himself was the one to summon it."

"No, that doesn't fit," refuted Mordred. "If we assume, as seems clear, that the Imperials wanted us to know about the *Irene* departing the Southern Continent, then Zettour had to be in on the whole scheme from the start. And since Lergen would still want his true identity kept secret, he couldn't just summon an abyssal monster by himself. This has to be one of Division Y's superweapons. This whole fiasco doesn't provide us any evidence one way or another regarding our theory that Lergen is the Not-Man's latest reincarnation."

"About that, there is one other thing," said Agravain hesitantly. "In the latest report from our agents in the Empire, it was mentioned that Division Y has started making moves to publicize its activities to the population at large. Specifically, they are running a propaganda campaign showing the medical benefits of their research, using crippled soldiers from the frontlines who were miraculously returned to full health."

"… That's unusual and worth knowing, but how is it related to the situation ?" asked Kay.

"Because that campaign was approved by none other than Lergen himself," replied Agravain.

"See ?" said Merlin, eyes wide. "Even if Lergen isn't the Not-Man's latest incarnation, it's clear now that he is the true leader of Division Y."

"I agree," replied Kay. "Zettour must be Division Y's patron, while Lergen is the one in charge, and Degurechaff is one of their early, most powerful supersoldier-type Wunderwaffen. Hopefully she's the only one of their kind ?"

Agravain nodded, to everyone else's unspoken relief. "I had the enrolment records of the Empire discreetly checked some time ago, precisely for that reason. The Empire conscripts mages as soon as possible, but she is the only one to have joined the army at seven years old."

"If the war ends, we can still continue our efforts in more subtle ways," the spymaster continued. "Even with our ability to decrypt Imperial communications crippled for now, I still have agents in the Empire. Intrigue and diplomacy may succeed where force of arms cannot in sabotaging Division Y's research. We might be able to learn enough about the Wunderwaffen to mount a more effective defense, even create our own. We would also have time to search for more relics like the one we found in Kemet. Our flag is flown all across the globe : it would make sense for more vestiges of ancient magic to remain in our colonies."

"But what if," whispered Merlin, "we are correct, and Lergen is all that we fear him to be ?"

And that was the crux of the situation. If their theory about Lergen's true nature was as bonkers as it sounded, then it seemed that peace talks were the best course of action for the Allied Kingdom. But if it was correct, if there was indeed an immortal, reincarnating wizard pulling the strings of the Empire's Wunderwaffen programme for sinister ends, then giving him more time to grow his influence over the Empire might be a fatal mistake.

"In the end," spoke Mordred over the silence that had descended in the wake of Merlin's words, "it will be for the Prime Minister to decide. Our influence in the halls of power has waned with this latest fiasco. At this point, all we can do is provide him with all the information at our disposal, give him our best advice if he asks it, and trust in his judgment."

The head diplomat of the Round Table smiled bitterly. "After all, it's not as if he can make more of a mess of this war than we have, can he ?"

---

*December 12th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

"So," said Brigadier General Rudersdorf, looking up at his old friend over the table between them. "Your little gamble paid off, and you had your fun sending that message to the Albish. What now ?"

"Now," replied Zettour with a wry smile, "we get to the more boring part of Operation Enigma. We need to remove the weaknesses the Kingdom took advantage of for far too long. The cryptography department has designed new codes and protocols that should make it all but impossible for the Albish to decrypt them. Of course, they aren't as confident as they were last time they promised us the same thing, but I think being more aware of our enemies' capabilities will do us all good in the long run."

"Good, good," nodded Rudersdorf. "Isn't there a chance their spies will intercept the codes, though ? Surely they can't have gained all of the intelligence advantage they've had on us throughout the War purely from intercepting our wireless communications, and updating everyone's codebooks is going to be quite the undertaking."

"Which is why I'm having the copies transported by aerial mages," explained Zettour. "I would've had the Untoten do it, but there aren't enough of them and those we have are still needed on standby in case the Eikons show up again."

"That's all well and good," frowned Rudersdorf, "but what if the John Bulls decide to keep being idiots about this ? Their conduct so far doesn't exactly fill me with confidence that they'll suddenly start being reasonable."

"By now, support for the war is certain to be waning. Even those who do buy into the propaganda that we're an evil expansionist Empire are less than pleased with how things have gone so far."

The two of them fervently hoped that the Allied Kingdom's government would come to its senses and sue for peace. However, it was quite literally their job to plan for what to do if that didn't happen. And so, Zettour continued :

"Without the advantage of knowing roughly where the enemy ships are, repeating what we did with Projekt J will be more difficult, but not impossible. We'll need to discuss it with the Major, of course, but I think we should be able to send the U-152 back out to attack Albion warships until their naval advantage is eroded to nothing."

They had received a brief message informing them of the success of Operation Enigma's first phase, but the full report would have to wait. Degurechaff was still making her way back to the Fatherland on a submarine, and she'd taken the mages capable of handling the long-range communication spell with her. Zettour was certain that she'd have a full report ready by the time the U-152 docked, though : the girl was nothing if not impeccable when it came to paperwork. Combined with the skills she'd shown in managing Division Y, and if the Wunderwaffen program hadn't worked out, he'd no doubt she'd have done well in the Logistics Department.

"And once their Navy is out of the way," continued Rudersdorf with a glint of savage joy in his eyes, "we'll be able to land our Army straight on their doorstep, and teach Albion that it can't hide behind the waters forever."

"Yes," agreed Zettour, frowning. "Needless to say, the logistics of landing and supporting an army on the island, however, are complicated to say the least. Unless we've completely annihilated the Royal Navy by this point, raids on our supply lines are all but guaranteed."

"After we sink a few more squadrons with Projekt J, they might be too afraid to try their luck," suggested Rudersdorf.

"Maybe," allowed Zettour. "But if the defense of their homeland is at stake, I doubt their will to fight will break so easily. We'd need to escort every convoy with a strike force from Division Y ready to deploy Projekt J."

"Perhaps we can refit the submarine who helped them this time for that ?" suggested Rudersdorf. "Have it transferred from the Imperial Navy to Division Y ?"

"Hmm. Perhaps. I will need to ask the Major about this."

The two Brigadier Generals spent several moments in silence after this, each thinking of the various difficulties of the campaign that may await them in the future. While Zettour was in charge of logistics, leading the troops that did make it onto Albion would fall to Rudersdorf's department as head of Operations, after all.

"I have to ask, Zettour. This 'Operation Ragnarök' business … It was all fake, yes ? A trick to force the Kingdom's hand ?"

"Of course it was, old friend. Oh, I'm sure there are enough Wunderwaffen sealed away in Division Y's vaults to reduce the entire island of Albion to slag and leave only their capital standing behind their Kemetian wards, but it's not as if I want to use them. Major Degurechaff wouldn't stand for it anyway."

"That's probably for the best," grunted Rudersdorf. "If the Albish keep being stubborn, I expect we'll start being pressured to use these weapons regardless in order to force them to surrender."

"By slaughtering their civilian population ? Madness," Zettour shook his head. "Such a course would only strengthen their resolve to fight no matter the cost, and turn the other powers openly against us."

"I know. These people have no mind for strategy – they just think in terms of killing as many of the enemy as possible, I swear. Onto another matter : now that Colonel Lergen's role as bait was fulfilled, what do you intend to do with him ?"

"With her condition, Major Degurechaff is hardly suited for public appearances as Division Y's Director," replied Zettour. "I intend to have the good Colonel continue to serve as their public face, as well as their leader on the field when the Major cannot be deployed in person."

"I see," mused Rudersdorf. "Despite spending most of his career in the rear, he certainly has proven himself a capable commander, alongside General Romel. Did you have time to read that paper they sent us ?"

"'On the Strategic and Tactical Uses of Elder Magic in Warfare' ? Yes, I did. A worthy complement to the Major's old dissertation, I'd say."

The classified report that the commanders of the Southern Expedition had sent back to the Fatherland detailed the tactics they had used against the Albish at Al-Alamein, and against the Heresiarch at Kheriaha. Specifically, it explained how they had combined their Wunderwaffen with the more mundane troops at their disposal in order to maximize their efficiency.

General Romel's own contribution was mostly centered on the importance of mobility : a single truck full of Werwölfe in human form could transport a fighting force capable of punching well above its weight. The lightning guns of the troopers from Division Y were also devastatingly effective for their weight.

There were several more chapters, one of them about the optimal use of aerial mages in mobile warfare, and Zettour was fairly certain the whole paper would end up serving as the foundation of several courses at the Military Academy at some point. He'd circulated the paper among a handful of his most trusted subordinates, and they'd all agreed on that. One of them, the youngest of the bunch, had even nicknamed the whole approach to warfare 'Sturmkrieg' due to how fast and devastating the Wunderwaffen had proven to be on all fronts where they had been deployed.

The Brigadier General didn't know if the term would catch on, but he expected it, or another like it, would end up being used for the combination of Wunderwaffen and traditional military assets at some point. He knew enough about the military mindset to know it was inevitable.

"Well," continued Rudersdorf after a while, "her paper was focused on the methodology Division Y uses to reconstruct spells, if I recall correctly. Colonel Lergen and General Romel have a different approach. Which is to be expected, since they actually went through officer training. Not that I'm dismissing Degurechaff's tactical acumen – I have never met anyone else with her innate ability for it – but, well, you know."

Zettour understood what his friend was trying to say. Degurechaff was a genius, there was no denying that. But even a genius needed education in order to gain knowledge, and she had been sent straight to Division Y after graduating from the Military Academy. Without proper officer training, her current rank as Major was probably as high as she could rise through the ranks, and even that had only been possible due to the unique circumstances of Division Y and her performance after being attached to it.

Of course, it wasn't as if she really needed a higher rank. All members of Division Y Zettour had ever met were fiercely devoted to her, and her achievements lent her words a weight far beyond that of a mere Major. If not for the secrecy surrounding Division Y, she'd probably have received a peerage of nobility by now.

"So let's assume that's Albion taken care of for now," said Rudersdorf with admirable optimism, before his expression turned more serious. "That still leaves us with that problem in Francois."

The regular reports delivered by Untoten from Castle Schwartzstein had included a full transcript of what Lieutenant König's investigation in the Republic had uncovered. And their contents were certainly worrying.

"Three Eikons missing, and an operation to smuggle potential magic users out of the country by sea," Zettour summed up with a scowl. "And still no sign of De Lugo or Beauvais."

"The question is where they went," said Rudersdorf. "Any country would be all too glad to shelter them in exchange for their knowledge of Eikon creation."

Despite the Eikons' glaring failings, they were still the only thing that anyone else had managed to create with a fighting chance against the Wunderwaffen. The Ancient Kemetian spells the Kingdom was using could only be used for defense, and nobody knew how to create more Fiends of the Nameless City (which was for the best, of that Zettour and Rudersdorf were certain).

"Let's go over the list one more time," decided Zettour. "We can be fairly certain the Allied Kingdom doesn't have them, else they'd have used them in their attack on the *Irene*. The Ispagna Collective is a mess, and if one of their political factions had gained access to supersoldiers I'd expect us to hear about their sudden rise to power. The Francois colonies on the Southern Continent are plausible : despite the Francois President's efforts, De Lugo might still have allies among the military there willing to hide him in order to 'save the Republic' from our occupation. Magna Rumeli is a bit too distant to be plausible, I think, and there'd be religious differences at play here as well."

"And then," finished Rudersdorf after taking a long puff of his cigar, "there is Ildoa."

Zettour grimaced. "Yes. Ildoa."

In the south of the Empire, the Kingdom of Ildoa had remained neutral in the Great War so far. In fact, trade with the Empire had increased across the border, as the Fatherland took advantage of Ildoa's willingness to serve as an intermediary to access the global market in exchange for a not-insignificant cut. The Republic and then the Allied Kingdom had put pressure on them to stop, but just like the Empire had to avoid pushing too far in its attempts to secure Ildoa as an ally in the Great War, so too did their enemies have to be cautious not to drive Ildoa into the Reich's embrace.

It was a strange balancing act, and Zettour didn't envy the Ildoan diplomats who had to maintain that equilibrium month after month as the Great War raged on, but it had certainly served their country well. After all, no Ildoan soldier had died and their land hadn't been invaded.

Now, however, there was a possibility that neutrality would end, and not in the Reich's favor.

"If the Archbishop was the one handling their escape," continued Zettour, "then Ildoa makes sense as a destination. There has always been plenty of smuggling between Francois and Ildoa."

"More to the point, that's where the Holy See is located," said Rudersdorf, bluntly pointing out what Zettour was reluctant to voice out loud. "The headquarters of the Church, to which Archbishop Beauvais belongs as one of its higher-ups. We know he had contacts there – he had to, to reach his position in Parisee."

Sure, the politics of the Holy See were much less bloody than they had been in centuries past, but neither of the two old generals were foolish enough to think there wasn't a degree of intrigue going on to decide who got which post.

"It has been generations since the Holy See involved itself in temporal affairs," Zettour tried to argue, more for the sake of argument than because he genuinely believed in his words.

"Even in the last war between the Reich and the Republic, they stayed studiously neutral, apart from calling for peace and love between neighbours.

A position that, ironically, was very close to that held by the adherents of the Path of Stars in Arene, Zettour realized with a twitch at the corners of his mouth.

"We weren't using supersoldiers in the last war," replied Rudersdorf. "And you cannot deny that the Werwölfe look rather intimidating to say the least. The existence of the Wunderwaffen changes everything. You read the report on what they found in Kemet : who's to say the Inquisition didn't hide away other such relics when they purged Europa's magic users centuries ago ?"

"You're right. It still seems unlikely, but we need to prepare for the eventuality. Once our communications are secure … no, that will take too long. I will send a message by plane to the commanders of the Southern Army telling them to be on guard against a possible Eikon deployment."

"Are you sure ? Even if the Ildoans get their hands on Eikons, they have little reason to declare war on us. There is that whole dispute about what they call Irredeemed Ildoa, yes, but that doesn't seem worth facing our Wunderwaffen for."

"You forget two things, my friend. First, none of the other combatants in this war joined it for what we would consider rational reasons. Secondly, remember what Lieutenant König believes the Eikons to be capable of when in the presence of someone for a prolonged period."

"… Ah." Rudersdorf's face looked like he had just swallowed a lemon. "I see what you mean. If they are right, then things could get very ugly, Zettour."

"I know, old friend. I know."

---

*"General Gassman,*

*It is His Holiness' wish to discuss with you important matters related to the ongoing war in Europa, and the safety of the Kingdom of Ildoa.*

*Please present yourself to the Holy See at the following time and location ..."*

Excerpt from a letter addressed to General Gassman of the Kingdom of Ildoa, December 14th, 1925.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Whew. I had to push, but I managed to get this chapter done today as planned.

This chapter was mostly the fallout of the previous one, as might be expected. And, oh yes, the implication of DOOM at the end. I am sure General Gassman has nothing to worry about. Gassman is a canon character from the Light Novel, standing in as the commander of the Ildoan military. Going into more details about his actions in the LN would be a spoiler, so check it out yourselves if you are interested.

I ended up going with 'Sturmkrieg' as the pop-culture name for the Mythos-combined warfare. Of course, as mentioned in the chapter, if a better alternative is proposed, I might still change it. Also, if you're wondering why Zettour signs off a message to Albion with "For the Fatherland", well, it's the last time those words will appear at the end of a wireless message in this story. Because, as one reader pointed out, repeated formulas like this one are precisely how seemingly unbreakable codes end up broken. It's still here only because Zettour wanted to make sure the Albish would be able to decipher it promptly.

As GremlinJack pointed out on SB, the naval tactics used by the Royal Navy in the last chapter were somewhat questionable, since there was no mention of the planes of the Ark Royale being used at all. My explanation-after-the-fact is that Cook didn't want to risk sending planes near the convoy transporting an unknown number of Wunderwaffen and chose to simply bombard them into oblivion from a safe distance (which, to be frank, Mighty Hood alone could have done on her own under normal circumstances).

As always, I look forward to your thoughts and ideas for this story. My writing speed seems to have somewhat stabilized, so don't expect anymore instances of two or more chapters being written in a single week.

Finally, I'm planning to publish a special something tomorrow (which is why I forged ahead to finish this today, as it still needs quite a lot of work). I hope you all will enjoy it.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*16th December, 1925 – Unified States – Research Group 51 Facility*

As he walked out of the car that had brought him and his bodyguards here, the President of the Unified States thought back on recent events.

Since the defeat suffered by the Royal Navy, Prime Minister Churbull had been playing for time. His diplomats had started meeting with the Empire's, while others made entreaties to the other powers, looking for allies. Meanwhile, Albion's fleet had been gathered around the islands, and troop transports had delivered fresh divisions to the Kingdom's mainland.

The President suspected that the Bulldog, as the Prime Minister was called by friend and foe alike, was making a play where either something would come up and turn the tide of the war, or, if nothing happened, all the blame for throwing the Allied Kingdom into the war could be put on his shoulders, and his successor would be in a better position, both at home and when dealing with the Empire at the negotiation table. If that were the case, then the man had to be admired for his patriotism, if nothing else.

Then again, the President might be wrong, and Churbull was just too stubborn to quit or admit that he'd made a mistake. It wasn't as if he knew the man personally. Maybe he saw the generosity of the terms offered by the Empire as a starting point for negotiations as an insult to his country's honor, for all the President knew.

In truth, that generosity was baffling the experts on this side of the ocean. It was one thing for a country to be gracious in victory, although the President was realist enough to know it was far, far rarer than what was implied in the schools' textbooks. But there was a reason why most nations had regarded the Empire as a military with a state attached to it rather than the reverse, even before the Great War had started.

There was something at work within the Empire, keeping it from becoming greedy, ensuring that the propaganda fed to its population walked the thin line between maintaining popular support and avoiding breeding revanchism. The best guess of the political analysts working for the President was that the Empire had lucked out and its current Kaiser was both reasonable and clever enough to look to the long-term interests of his country. It was, the President knew, one of the arguments used by the proponents of monarchy : the fact that a sovereign could act regardless of the ebb and flow of politics, their eyes fixed on the horizon. Of course, that was nonsense : far more frequently, the monarch was an entitled fool surrounded by yes-men and bootlickers. But unless there was an entire faction at the Imperial Court working in the shadows, the Kaiser's personal involvement was the most likely option.

Considering what the Wunderwaffen could do if the Empire abandoned all restraint, the President gave prayers of thanks to the Lord that was the case. He would take the increased headaches of having to deal with a complicated political situation over waking up one day to

learn that Londinium or Parisee had been razed to the ground as an example to keep the rest of Europa in line.

At the moment, the President had no intention of dragging the Unified States into the Great War, despite the efforts of the Allied Kingdom's diplomats. However, he wasn't blind to the threat the Wunderwaffen posed to his country, should whoever was keeping the Empire's lust for conquest under check change their mind or lose their influence – or, hell, just die of old age eventually. Which was why he was here, in the middle of nowhere, to check in on the progress of the Unified States' counter-measures.

"I have to ask," he asked the man next to him as they walked, "why '51' ? I think I would know if we had fifty other research groups."

"I have absolutely no idea," Nicol Teslus replied cheerfully. "You would have to ask the bureaucrats who named the place."

The site was composed of several buildings surrounded by a fence with multiple watchtowers, each with a gun's nest at the top. The President of the Unified States was ushered by a very enthusiastic Teslus into one of them, where the demonstration would take place.

"We have made great progress since the work started," said the inventor. "I think you'll be impressed with the results."

"I certainly hope so," replied the President. God knew he could do with some good news at the moment.

"Most of our work has been based around building devices to enhance soldiers with some magical potential, but not enough to qualify as aerial mages. Like these !" Teslus said proudly, gesturing to a table on which laid several helmets with thick, green lenses. "These are nightvision googles. They require only the slightest use of mana to function, and give their wearer the same kind of sight in low-light conditions animals like cats enjoy. The resulting view is quite monochrome, but it is a massive advantage in night battles."

The President was no expert in military matters (that was why he had his advisors), but he had spent some time in the Army in his youth, and was intelligent enough to realize the implications. Night battles were rare in the modern era, because carrying around a light source made you an obvious target and you needed to be able to see for obvious reasons. Soldiers with these would be all but unstoppable in the darkness … at least against other conventional troops. Given that the Imperial supersoldiers had been deployed at night on the Rhine Front, these were more of an equalizer, but a welcome one to be sure.

"That sounds very useful," he said out loud.

"So I've been assured by our military consultants," said Teslus, gesturing at the handful of officers standing nearby, all of whom had long-suffering expressions on their faces that told the President that, regardless of his genius, Teslus had been speaking the truth when he'd claimed to be difficult to work with. "We have also built improved magical detection arrays, with triple the range of the model currently used by the army, and at least twice the precision.

And of course, our latest computation orb model has just finished the last round of testing and is ready to start production for the aerial mages of our country."

"Speaking of aerial mages," asked the President. "Have you made any progress in figuring the Imperial stealth mages out ?"

"Unfortunately, no," replied Teslus, looking genuinely disappointed. "Our best guess is that the Imperials have figured out a way to optimize spell casting to the point there are no mana emission, but if so, the technology to do so ourselves is far beyond us at the moment." He pointed back to the nightvision helmets : "we have incorporated a new heat detection system in the helmet, but any mage worth his salt can trick that if they know it's in play. And with how little information we have on the Imperial stealth mages, there is no way of knowing if this would work on them at all."

"These are all very promising designs," he said, because it was true. Before the Great War, any one of these would have been game changers in their own right. "But I can't help but notice that you haven't shown me anything that could match the Wunderwaffen."

Teslus smiled again. "Ah, that's because I wanted to start with the smaller stuff, Mister President ! Follow me, please. Let me show you the future, not just of warfare, but of Humanity !"

The 'future of Humanity' was spread on an entire table, and looked like a cube of metal with a lever on one end and a pair of cables on the other, running through several light bulbs. All in all, it wasn't very impressive. Teslus walked toward the device, and after seemingly taking a few seconds to collect himself, pulled the lever down. Immediately, the blocky machine started to purr, and the row of lightbulbs lit up.

The President blinked. "You've invented an electrical generator ?"

"In a fashion, I suppose. But the thing is, Mister President," said Teslus with a wry smile, "there is no fuel within that device. No coal, no oil, nothing. I jump-started it with a bolt of mana, and now it is producing an electric current."

"That … that's impossible," managed to say the President as the implication of what Teslus was saying dawned on him. "Perpetual motion is a hoax."

"Please," snorted Teslus. "This isn't 'perpetual motion'. We can only get the engine to keep running for a few hours before it starts overheating, and it needs maintenance between activation, along with replacement parts once they burn out or are worn down. Even so, this power source made the rest of our armaments much more practical. We call it the Teslus Engine, or T-Engine in short. This one was the first proof of concept I built in order to convince my dear colleagues it was possible."

"*How* ?" asked the President.

"Well -"

"If you'll excuse me, sir ?" cut in a nearby technician. After a moment, Teslus sighed and gestured for him to go on. "Mister Teslus has tried to explain how the T-Engine works to some of the scientists assigned to the Research Group. Most of them didn't understand his explanation at all, and a few ended up having a mental breakdown and needing to be sent off to rest and hopefully recover."

The President blinked, then turned toward Teslus.

"That is correct," said the genius inventor. "The theory behind how it works is … complex, to say the least. Even I get severe headaches when I work on it, and *I* came up with the bloody thing in the first place. I assure you that it does make sense, it's just … counter-intuitive to the way we perceive the universe with our limited senses. Most of the pieces can be built by our engineers without problems. But a handful of components need to be handcrafted by myself, and I need to perform the final assembly as well. Which means that at the moment, if I die, then the entire technology will be lost – and however flattering that might be for my ego, I suspect that isn't convenient for the rest of the country."

"Even so, this is … beyond revolutionary," whispered the President. "I struggle to imagine how such a technology might change society."

"I know," nodded Teslus, looking serious for the first time since the President had arrived at the facility. "It could serve so many uses beyond warfare. We're looking for people with the right mindset to absorb such difficult knowledge, but haven't had any luck so far."

The President took a deep breath. "Alright. Much as I would like to have this T-Engine used solely for peaceful purposes, I still need to see what you did with it."

"Of course. Here !" Like a performer on a stage, Teslus pulled a curtain off a trio of what looked like suits of medieval armor, except much heavier and modern. Huge rifles, which looked more like smaller artillery pieces than handheld weapons, laid on a huge rack next to them.

"These are mechanized power armors," explained Teslus. "Each of them has a small T-Engine in the back to provide power for motion, as they are far too heavy for even the strongest man to move otherwise. Once strapped inside, the pilot activates the T-Engine, giving them around six hours of safe use before the engine needs to be shut down. During that time, they can move at speeds of up to thirty kilometers an hour, with short bursts of up to sixty, can lift a car with ease, and most importantly, can generate a magical shield not inferior to those of a fully-fledged aerial mage. With what we know of the Imperial Devils, I believe these armored suits would be more than a match for them."

In the half-hour that followed, the test pilots of the armored suits – each of whom a soldier who had tested positive for magical potential, but too low to qualify for aerial mage – performed a very impressive demonstration of the suits' capabilities, proving Teslus' claims to be true. One of them even stood in place while an aerial mage fired attack spells at him, his energy shield holding for several shots before finally collapsing with a clap of thunder – and even then, it popped back up after a few moments.

"That's incredible," said the President once the demonstration was over and he'd had a chance to personally congratulate the pilots on their work.

"I knew you would like them," smiled Teslus. "Of course, with the need for me to personally build each T-Engine, ramping up production is difficult. It takes me about a hundred hours of work to get one engine complete, and I think I've streamlined the process as much as I can. But that's not the biggest surprise we've in store for you."

They went outside of the building and into an open field. There laid a huge contraption of metal and wires that the President couldn't begin to identify, except that the overall shape vaguely reminded him of a big, ten-meters long gun. The impression was helped by the presence of a seat at one end in which a man covered in protective gear was seated, similar to an artillery piece – except this one was horizontal.

"It has an official and complicated name," Teslus said, "but I prefer to call it the death ray. "It incorporates elements of computation orbs, but only for one, singular spell. There are two separate T-Engines inside, much larger ones than those in the armored suits, and you need to be a mage to fire it as well – and a true mage, too. But the results, well, you'll see for yourself."

He was brought to a small concrete shelter, and given a pair of thick tinted googles as well as a pair of ear protectors. The other people in the bunker wore the same, and so did the gunner sitting behind the apparatus. An old and burned-out tank had been dragged a hundred meters or so in front of it.

Teslus counted down from ten, and when he hit zero, everything was light, even with the googles, and the President felt as if his very bones were going to vibrate out of his skin. When he finally blinked his vision clear, there was nothing but a deep crater were the tank had been.

"Impressive, isn't it ?" asked Teslus once they had all removed their ear-protecting gear. "We are working on improving its design to make it more compact. With what happened to the *Mighty Hood*, I thought the Navy would like something that could kill that 'Kraken' creature which sank the Albish squadron a few weeks back. We're also working on a much smaller version, without the T-Engines inside, that could be fitted on the armored suits and use their own power source instead."

"That would certainly be easier to use," said the President. "I didn't see clearly, but this thing fires in a straight line, yes ?"

"Completely straight, yes," confirmed Teslus.

"So it cannot be used for artillery. But I'm guessing you didn't build that just as another proof of concept ?"

"Of course not ! Come, and I'll show you the last part of your visit."

They walked to a building the President was certain had been used as a hangar before – but as its gates rolled open, he saw that it wasn't planes sheltering from the elements inside. Instead,

within that hangar was a giant of metal, over twenty meters tall and just under half as large. Dozens of engineers were working on various sections of it, doing God alone knew what. Some of its body was covered in thick metal plating, but the rest was still exposed wiring and gears. Yet even in this incomplete, completely immobile state, the construct radiated a sense of power and threat.

"We call it the Titan," said Teslus proudly. "With the largest T-Engine I've ever built installed within its chest, its output far outstripping the others. It's far from finished, of course. I know it may look … somewhat absurd, but I had what I felt were good reasons to insist we test its potential. Even now, over a year later, we don't know much about what happened to the Dacian Army."

That was true, the President knew. The Dacian survivors all suffered great trauma, and those who managed to recover refuse to speak about it : they all appear to have repressed their memories of the battle, and react violently to attempts to coax information out of them.

"However, based on the initial interviews we were given by our Albish friends, it seems the first Wunderwaffe ever deployed by the Empire took the form of some kind of enormous monsters, not that different from the Kraken that sunk the Royal Navy squadron. The Imperials haven't used that particular superweapon since then, but I still felt we should be prepared for it. And what better way to fight giant monsters than by building our own ?"

He had to admit that it made a twisted kind of sense. Still …

"Is the humanoid form really necessary, though ?" asked the President. "I can understand its purpose with the armored suits, since they're for infantry, but I would think using it for something that size presents all sorts of engineering challenges." There was a reason cars used wheels and tanks rolled around on tracks while walking automatons were restricted to children's toys, after all.

"Oh, absolutely," agreed Teslus. "We tested a tank-shaped frame first, which was much easier to build. But it turns out the piloting system is much more intuitive and responsive if the construct's design mirrors that of the human form. I believe that is because the pilots are, in the end, humans, and the human mind is naturally more suited to controlling a human-shaped body. If the T-Engine was a mere power source, that wouldn't be an issue – we could just slap one in the place of a tank engine and be done with it – but … Ah, I probably should shut up." The inventor looked slightly embarrassed. "I would rather avoid driving you crazy as well, Mister President. Let's just say there are certain design constraints involved in building an arcane warmachine powered by a T-Engine."

"I would much rather avoid that as well," said the President drily. "Anything else ?"

"We're thinking of mounting the death-ray on the Titan chassis, to serve as a kind of arm cannon once we figure out the remaining engineering problems that presents," replied Teslus. "It'll make bringing its firepower to bear much easier, and as I said, even Division Y's monsters will struggle when faced with its power. I'm also thinking of installing anti-air batteries on its shoulders, to make life harder for aerial mages targeting the Titan. They'd need to have a crew, of course, but I think there's more than enough place."

For a moment, the President imagined the future of warfare : armies of metal giants striding the earth as they marched to war, each carrying weapons such as this. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he visualized the utter desolation they would leave in their wake. A new kind of war, more total in its destruction than even the records of the Rhine he had witnessed, as man-made gods of steel and magic clashed with the Elder Magic of the Empire, with hapless soldiers caught in the middle.

Shivering, he briefly felt the impulse to shut down the entire thing, to bury all this terrible knowledge where it couldn't hurt anyone. But he had sworn an oath to God that he'd keep his country safe, and this was exactly what he needed for that.

"Well done, Mister Teslus," he finally said. "You and your colleagues have greatly exceeded my expectations."

They were far from Division Y's level yet, and even getting this far had cost a considerable amount of money. But at least they were in the race now, instead of watching from the sidelines or not even knowing they should be running. Besides, the Imperials had to have been working on their Wunderwaffen for decades before the Great War had started. Considering Teslus and the rest had been working for less than six months, what they had achieved was already amazing.

"I will increase your funding as much as I can," he continued. "I will also set people to work on discreetly finding candidates to learn about the T-Engine. I will discuss matters with rest of High Command, but for now, I'd like you to focus on getting the Titan ready for combat, and as many armored suits and their pilots as you can. As for the rest, we'll entrust mass-production to others now that you've completed the designs."

Scaling up production would take time, even if they found people capable of learning how to build more T-Engines. It would be months, if not years before the Unified States was ready to field the creations of Research Group 51 in significant numbers.

The President sighed. The Allied Kingdom was on its own, then, because he refused to send millions of his citizens to die pointlessly against the Empire's Wunderwaffen. But at the very least, he now had the prospect of a counter to Division Y's superweapons, which would prevent total Imperial military domination.

Of course, he couldn't exactly say that to the Albish. Keeping Research Group 51's work secret was of paramount importance. But if he was to look like he'd abandoned their cousins in their time of need in the eyes of History, well, nobody with any sense had ever said the job of President of the Unified States was easy.

---

*"We got a letter today from Division Y at the office.*

*At first, we were ecstatic. I don't think it controversial to say that everyone working in R&D for the Imperial Army dreams of learning more about the makers of the Wunderwaffen. It's also common knowledge that since the Dacian invasion, Division Y has always worked alongside other branches of the Imperial Army. Given that we've been working on submarine torpedoes and other technologies for the use of the Navy, and that we'd all heard about the*

*destruction wrought upon the* Mighty Hood *and her squadron, we thought we were going to be roped in to help scale up whatever it was that led to this glorious victory.*

*That … wasn't the case.*

*Apparently, the mysterious Director of Division Y (for security reasons, the letter didn't include their name, but there is no doubt of its authenticity) was recently aboard one of the Empire's submarines. It probably was during the operation that sunk the Hood, and during that time, they spoke with the sailors crewing the sub. They learned about the … difficulties the Empire's submarines have encountered in making use of the armaments developed by our department since the start of the war.*

*The letter's contents were as unfailingly polite as they were merciless in their assessment of our work. Bluntly put, they tore apart our entire approach to our work, accusing us of pursuing higher specs at the expense of making sure the weapons could actually be used. They wrote that we, removed from the field of battle as we are, have succumbed to tunnel vision.*

*Coming from anyone else, we would have dismissed it, but it's Division Y. Since none of us want to have possibly the most powerful person in the entire Imperial Army angry at us, we've decided to follow their 'respectful suggestions'. It will take some time to adjust, but we've already started to work on implementing new testing procedures that should recreate the actual use conditions more faithfully.*

*… We're also going to have to ask the Navy to send people to help make sure we don't miss something again. I can already imagine how smug they will be, but, well, I suppose we deserve it."*

Excerpt from the journal of a researcher at the Imperial Navy's R&D Department, December 16th, 1925.

---

*December 18th, 1925 – Castle Schwartzstein*

I breathed a sigh of relief as I landed after spending a couple of hours training with the Nazzadi in the airspace above Castle Schwartzstein. Zerayah and her team were learning fast : even with the advantage given by my walking stick's superior capabilities, it was all I could do to keep up with the four of them when we trained.

"Well done," I congratulated them as we stretched after the intense exercise we had put ourselves through. "You keep getting better."

"We still cannot match you," said Zerayah. We were speaking Imperial, of course : while a handful of our linguistic team had become semi-passable in the Nazzadi tongue, I wasn't one of them, and it was better for them to get used to the language of their adoptive country in any case.

"I have been doing this for years," I told her. With how time had been messed up on Nazza-Duhni, teaching them about how our calendar worked had been an interesting experience, but

Zerayah had grasped it quickly. "If you could get to my level so fast, it would reflect poorly on me."

They didn't look too disappointed, but then they'd seen me fight Akhar-Zegog, so they hadn't been expecting to defeat me. I had told them I'd only been able to do it thanks to the Kosmosblut; well, not in so many words, I couldn't exactly reveal military secrets like that, but I'd made sure the Nazzadi knew that power wasn't something I could use at all time.

We changed out of our practice gear and back into our proper uniforms, despite the Nazzadi now having proper civilian clothes. The paperwork to get Imperial citizenships for the Nazzadi refugees had gone through, just like General Zettour had promised. Imperial bureaucracy being what it was, it would still take some time before we received the passports and other documents that would hopefully allow them to become part of Imperial society one day. At least now that they had an official existence I could actually pay them, although explaining the concept of money to post-apocalyptic tribals had been an interesting challenge that had taken me back to Economics 101.

After a few more minutes spent discussing the details of our aerial bout, I left them to return to my office. As I walked through the corridors of Castle Schwartzstein, one hand on my walking stick and one eye out for threat (despite all my efforts to promote a safe working environment, you never knew when one of the occultists would mess up and call forth some unspeakable horror from the beyond), my mind turned onto greater matters.

In the wake of Operation Enigma (a name chosen by General Zettour, which hadn't exactly filled me with confidence when I'd first heard it), we had intensified operational security as much as we reasonably could, following Elya's suggestions. At this point, one of the only ways we could think of for the Allied Kingdom to turn things around would be to somehow figure out our location and attack us directly. Given the location of Division Y's headquarters within Imperial territory, I couldn't see how the John Bulls might be able to bring the army they'd need to defeat the little menagerie of nightmares that inhabited Castle Schwartzstein, but sabotage or theft were still possibilities.

After all, a desperate enemy was at its most dangerous, and the pro-war faction of the Allied Kingdom certainly was desperate. According to Zettour's latest message, it wouldn't be long now before Albion folded. Protests against both their joining and conduct of the war were getting more and more frequent, despite the best efforts of the Allied Kingdom's propaganda machine. The King of Kemet had also started making noise, and there was word that several other Albish holdings were starting to get ideas too, now that it seemed the star of their colonial overlord was fading.

Partisan activity in Legadonia was all but gone. The manner in which they had conducted their first wave of attacks months ago had ensured that only the most idiotically fanatical 'patriots' would join up, and such individuals weren't exactly subtle. There'd never been any resistance to Imperial occupation in Dacia to speak of : the sheer totality of their army's defeat had crushed any notion of fighting back. As for Francois, the Republic's mainland was quiet, with the Albish too afraid of our stealth mages to risk crossing the Dodobird Strait. The military governors of their colonies had also calmed down after our little demonstration in Kemet : none of them wanted General Romel to pay them a visit. Even without Division Y's

support, the man had more than enough conventional forces at his disposal to teach a lesson to any blue-blood with thoughts of setting himself up as king.

The only danger left was the Eikons. By now, Imperial Intelligence was almost certain De Lugo and Beauvais had taken refuge somewhere in Ildoa, by process of elimination if nothing else. However, the Kingdom of Ildoa had stayed neutral throughout the Great War, which I could admit I was envious of. At this point, there was no logical reason for them to join in, even if they had managed to get the knowledge to create Eikons of their own.

Unfortunately, Eikons weren't logical beings but pawns of Being X. Given that the center of this world's most powerful religion was located within Ildoa as well, the danger was obvious. And while nobody at Central Headquarters was happy about the prospect of another front opening, they had taken my warnings about König's report seriously and had quietly increased our defenses in the south. The fact that there was a huge chain of mountains serving as a natural border between us and Ildoa meant that any conventional attack would turn into a grinding slaughter : I vaguely remembered that, during the First World War in my old world, the Alps had been the site of some truly gruelling attrition. Combine that with the winter covering the mountains with snow, and no army would try to go on the offensive.

Of course, the Eikons changed things, as they cared nothing for such paltry things as weather conditions. So we had taken precautions against their possible deployment. New M-912s had been built and sent to the military bases in the mountains, to be kept hidden until and unless Eikons were sighted. The M-912s hadn't been used against human enemies yet, and while such wasn't banned by international treaty I was fairly certain it ought to be. The aerial mages of the Southern Army had also been briefed on the Eikons' capabilities (although to be fair, so had the mages of every other Army, because the Reich was nothing if not thorough), and told not to engage unless they had a massive numerical advantage. At the moment, our hopes were that, if and when Ildoa declared war on us, the Southern Army would hold long enough for reinforcements to arrive, including those from Division Y.

On that end, we were as ready as we could be. The Untoten we had raised after the Battle of the Rhine had finished their training and were ready for deployment. Our alchemists had also produced more than enough Endlose Nacht for each instance of Projekt U, although we hadn't tested what the effect of a second dose would be. Asking the Denkmaschine for its best guess had been inconclusive, but it was clear it wouldn't be pleasant. Worst-case scenario, I still had a dose of Kosmosblut on my person : given that I had torn through the first Eikons in Arene unarmed during my first use of the serum, part of me was looking forward to letting loose with my walking stick back in its original shape.

There had been a proposal to send Wunderwaffen along with more troops to the border to stand guard, but it had been rejected. There was a chance that massing troops at the border would push the Kingdom of Ildoa to declare war, quite understandably seeing such a build-up as a prelude to us invading them.

All in all, things were going great, which meant I was left waiting for the other shoe to drop.

---

*December 20th, 1925 – The Holy See*

They were running out of time.

The flow of new candidates for the Holy Knights had all but dried up with the abandon of their operations in the Republic and the Empire's presence on the Southern Continent, but every new blessed warrior increased their chances of victory, and the regular troops could have used more training as well. Ildoa had spent too long in indolence, relying on diplomacy rather than force of arms to keep it safe. In another, better world, that attitude might have served it well, but with the forces of Hell having subverted its northern neighbour, it was suicidal. Worse, it was heresy.

One by one, the members of Ildoan High Command had been brought into the fold. Starting with General Gassman, they had been illuminated as to the true nature of the struggle ravaging Europa, and had sworn themselves to the cause. In time, De Lugo knew with utter certainty, the entire Ildoan army could have been reforged into one shining blade of faith, invincible and unbreakable. Not even all the Wunderwaffen of the Empire would have stood a chance against them then.

But time was running out. It was clear that the Allied Kingdom, for all its erstwhile bravado, would surrender to the Empire's demands soon. Without anyone openly defying the Empire, Dacia, Francois and Legadonia would fall under its shadow. Hidden behind pretty words and treaties, the poison of infernal corruption would spread, and all of Europa would be damned. They had to act now, and show the faithful that with the light of the Lord at their side, the darkness that consumed the Empire could be fought. Not just endured as the Albish had with the ancient secrets they had exhumed and repurposed to protect their precious capital, but fought, and eventually defeated.

De Lugo was under no illusion that the path ahead would be easy. The blessing of the Lord only gave His servants a fighting chance : it was up to them to prove worthy of it through victory.

Since the start of the Great War, Ildoa had at least kept troops on its northern border. In the last few days, as the Congregation strengthened its control over the Kingdom, more divisions had been sent there in preparation. Fifty divisions in total, over half a million men, now stood ready, although only a tiny handful among them knew what was about to unfold.

It was a mighty force, even by the standards of this terrible war. With the strength of the Holy Knights added to it, no mortal foe could stand in their way. Yet De Lugo knew in his heart of hearts that, for all its righteous strength, this glorious host they had assembled would not be enough. To defeat the Devil's apostle, they'd need a weapon to match the spear of the Archangel whose name the Congregation bore, the very weapon which had struck down the Father of Lies and cast him into Hell at the dawn of time.

By the grace of the Lord, they had such a weapon : the Trinity's Tear, the world's first and only tri-core computation orb. Now all they needed was someone to wield it, which had proven harder to find than expected.

In the two months since Doctor Schugel had completed the holy relic, the Holy Knights had poured all of their strength into the Trinity's Tear. The artefact was near-bursting with collected power, holding together only thanks to the miracle that had gone in its construction.

The last time De Lugo had laid eyes upon it, he had nearly been blinded by its radiance. Without the protections woven into the walls of the Congregation's headquarters, it would have tripped magical sensors all across the peninsula. Not even the Holy Knights enhanced by Doctor Schugel's ministrations could wield its awesome power : a true champion of God was required to make use of it, to contain its might and wield it in service of the Lord.

They had searched for a suitable candidate, and finally, the hand of the Lord had guided them. Now, on this holy day, Archbishop Beauvais was performing the new rite he'd received from the Heavens : one that would not elevate twelve of the Lord's chosen, but instead reforge a single soul into the instrument of His will on Earth. Once the Archbishop was done, Doctor Schugel would immediately start working to make the final adjustments, using the knowledge he had gained from the Lord and the experience from practicing on the Holy Knights.

The sacrament was taking place in the holiest of holies, reserved for their use on this day by the command of His Holiness himself. De Lugo, still just a mortal man despite all that had happened, stood at the gates, looking at the holy city around him and taking in its beauty one more time. He had stood there for several hours now, but the fire of faith was sustaining him. Holy Knights in their human guise stood guard, ensuring nobody strayed too close and heard the chanted prayers and unearthly noises.

Finally, the great doors opened, and Doctor Schugel emerged. He looked both exhausted and exalted, sweat running down his brow while his eyes shone with fading golden light.

"Well ?" asked De Lugo.

"It is done," answered the one Imperial who had seen the truth as his nation sank into ruin. "The Saint is ready."

"Then it is time for the Crusade to begin."

---

*December 22nd, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

Slowly, Brigadier General Zettour lowered the decoded letter he'd just received from the Southern Army Headquarters.

It was taking all of his self-control not to let his expression change in front of the aide who had delivered the message and the rest of his people in the office where he had been working on contingency plans for the Allied Kingdom. He was a staff officer of the Reich, and one of the men who had led the Empire to victory after victory. It didn't matter that those victories had been built upon the work of a young girl who made the impossible look easy : it was his duty to keep up appearances, for the sake of morale.

He kept staring at the words on the page, but they stubbornly refused to change.

*... the Holy See has taken control of the Kingdom of Ildoa, and declared a Holy Crusade against the Empire ...*

*... dozens of Eikons have been sighted accompanying the Ildoan Army, and the mana detectors indicate many more are present ...*

*... reports from the scouts who managed to escape the Eikons indicate that they have blasted a straight path right through the mountains with some kind of magical superweapon of their own ...*

Zettour took a deep breath, and steadily ignored the headache that was already forming in his skull.

"Call General Rudersdorf, please," he said calmly. "And bring an aerial mage cleared for messenger duty as well."

Chapter End Notes

AN : How is that for escalation ?

Yes, after asking on SB how the mountains between Italy and Germany would influence the war and receiving many lengthy and well thought out responses, I decided to instead have the Congregation use magic to remove the mountains that stood in their way. I was inspired by A Young Woman's Political Record, where it is mentioned that Tanya's final battle against Mary Sue 'redrew a few obscure Alpine maps'. If you are worried about the Congregation having access to that kind of firepower, try to imagine how Tanya feels right now. Of course, more details about just what happened will be provided in the next chapter, but I wanted to give you a taste of the Empire's own shock at this happening.

For the Unified States, the T-Engine is basically a steampunk version of CthuluTech D-Engine, which is a device allowing for unlimited free energy, the invention of which drove the initial inventor mad and on which research continues to drive scientists insane regularly in the setting. And yes, this basically allows you to bully the laws of thermodynamics and take their lunch money, but I was looking for a power source that could justify Teslus' magitek and when I remembered this concept, it all just clicked. It even fits into the cosmology I've constructed for this fic, and I feel the fact only Teslus can build them keeps it from being too much of a gamechanger. Also, I stole the idea that a humanoid form makes piloting mechs easier from the YS fanfic 'Tanya the Fuehrer', available on AO3.

I toyed with the idea of adding a skyship for the sheer coolness factor, but I couldn't come up with a justification for it being ready in so short a time (the Titan mech was already pushing it, even if it's far from complete). Maybe it's being worked on somewhere else : what do you think ? Are you interested in seeing that added to the story ?

As always, I look forward to your thoughts on this chapter and suggestions. Next up will probably be the second chapter of Ciaphas Cain : Warmaster of Chaos, which had a much more enthusiastic reception than I had anticipated.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*THE HOUR OF RETRIBUTION IS AT HAND !*

*Brothers and sisters of Ildoa, God is with us ! For too long, the Empire's vile heresies have been allowed to run unchecked. The heathen Imperial occultists have dabbled into matters forbidden since time out of memory, and called forth demons from the depths of Hell to fight their war of conquest for them, hiding their heresy behind a veil of science and innovation.*

*Yet such blasphemies cannot be committed without drawing the eye of the Lord, who is ever-watchful and benevolent. Within the Holy See, His servants have toiled tirelessly to prepare the sanctified weapons with which this evil will be expunged from the world He created and rules over.*

*For He is with us always, and He has chosen us to deliver His judgment upon the heretics who befoul His dominion. Even now, the armies of Ildoa march forth into the lair of the Beast, their unstoppable advance heralded by His Holy Knights, who bear His Divine Radiance within their reforged flesh. And at the head of this Holy Crusade is the Saint, blessed among the blessed, the holy instrument through which His Will is made manifest, and all obstacles to His Grand Design are swept away ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Ildoa News, December 22nd, 1925 (special edition, published following the temporary arrest of most of the newspaper's personnel).

---

*ILDOAN TREACHERY STRIKES BOVARIA !*

*As our Reich finally saw the end of the Great War on the horizon with our victories on the Southern Continent and on the waves, Fate, it seems, has decided to test us once more. The Kingdom of Ildoa, who until now was, if not an ally to our nation, then carefully neutral (an understandable position, especially given the terrible cost of a modern war that this conflict revealed), declared war on us yesterday.*

*The reasons behind this declaration are still obscure : the official proclamation makes all manners of wild, nonsensical allegations, leading this reporter to suspect that events of a most untoward nature have unfolded within Ildoa, and that this war might not be the will of the Ildoan people at all. Indeed, the fact that it was the Ildoan military and not their civilian government nor their king which made this proclamation is as disquieting as its contents, which ludicrously accuse the Empire of having made pacts with the Devil in exchange for the tools to conquer all of Europa – nevermind the fact that the Reich has proven time and again to have no such designs over the course of the Great War !*

*Not unlike the Allied Kingdom, this declaration came without warning. At the time of writing, there is very little information about the situation available. Even the Imperial Army, it*

*seems, was caught by surprise by the scale of Ildoa's onslaught : according to our contacts within High Command, all personnel has been called to answer this unprovoked attack by our southern neighbour.*

*However, it is clear that somehow, the Ildoan Army has passed the mountain chain serving as a natural border between our nations. There are numerous reports of enemy action all across Bovaria, with Bovariastadt itself being threatened.*

*We will keep you informed as we learn more ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Berun Post, December 23rd, 1925.

---

*"Hello, ambassador."*

*"I ... Hello, General Zettour."*

*"You are aware, of course, of the recent events that took place at the border between our nations ?"*

*"Y-yes. I have heard about them. But I swear to you, I had no idea this would happen ! I haven't received any information about this from the Kingdom !"*

*"Really ? Nothing ?"*

*"Nothing ! My latest dispatches three days ago told me to maintain Ildoa's neutrality in the war. Since the Wunderwaffen were discovered, my instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were clearer on the subject than ever before. And since then ... silence. I've tried to contact my superiors at the capital, but nobody is answering. I swear this is true !"*

*"I believe you."*

*"You ... you do ?"*

*"Yes. Prior to this, we had received ... concerning news, about the secret Francois supersoldier programme. We believed De Lugo took the knowledge to create more of the enhanced mages that were used in the Battle of the Rhine with him when he fled the Republic."*

*"I ... I cannot say that he wouldn't have been welcomed into Ildoa if he had that kind of information to bargain with. The Wunderwaffen have made everyone nervous, you know. That there would be someone willing to shelter him in exchange for it is not impossible. But why declare war ? More than that, why make it some kind of Crusade ?! This isn't the Middle Ages anymore !"*

*"I normally wouldn't share this information, but you still have family in Ildoa, do you not ?"*

*"Yes. Why ?"*

*"Because we have reason to believe that these enhanced mages, which we call 'Eikons', have the ability to influence minds. And, perhaps because they were once soldiers of the Republic, this influence takes the form of fanning the flames of hatred against the Empire in those exposed to it."*

*"I ... that is ..."*

*"Strange, isn't it ? It probably sounds ludicrous to you. Unfortunately, we in the Empire have learned that there is much we thought impossible that is instead all too real. And unless you have another explanation for the epidemic of religious madness that seems to have overcome your nation, it appears our worst fears about the Eikons still fell short of the reality."*

*"I ... oh God ..."*

*"You and the rest of the embassy's personnel will be confined to these grounds for the duration of the conflict. This is for your own safety, Ambassador. I am sure you understand."*

*"... yes. Thank you, General."*

*"You can rest assured that we'll do all in our power to get to the bottom of what happened in Ildoa. And the head of our Wunderwaffen research has, shall we say, strong opinions about the use of magic to alter the minds of others."*

Conversation at the Ildoan embassy in Berun – December 23rd, 1925.

---

*December 25th, 1925 – Londinium*

It might be Christmas, but the Round Table's work was never done. Outside, the country was celebrating the addition of Ildoa into the Great War against the Empire, but for the lords of the realm, the situation was far more complicated than it appeared at first glance.

"Well," said Kay as he looked at the latest dispatches from the Kingdom of Ildoa, "I know we were pretty much stuck waiting for a miracle, but I can safely say that none of us saw that coming."

"Indeed," agreed Agravain. "We had no idea the Holy See was assembling its own program of supersoldiers, let alone one so effective."

The Allied Kingdom had agents in Ildoa, of course. Keeping the country from joining the Empire's side in the war had been of critical importance (though that importance had greatly diminished since the Empire had started crushing all opposition with its Wunderwaffen), after all. But none of them had reported so much as a hint that something so momentous was in the works, which clearly was very annoying to Agravain. None of the other members of the Round Table were saying it, of course, but so soon after the debacle with the Second Squadron, this failure of their intelligence gathering apparatus certainly rankled.

"The Kingdom of Ildoa's political situation was already complicated," said Mordred with commendable understatement. "It hasn't been that long since the country was unified in the

first place, after all, and now this. Do we have any idea how the hell this happened ?"

"It was a coup," Agravain said. "The official declaration of war doesn't make any mention of the King of Ildoa, only claims they are operating under the guidance of His Holiness. This has to have been plotted within the walls of the Holy See, and we don't have nearly as many eyes there as we do in the Kingdom. Nothing else makes sense. I don't know how the Holy See got the Ildoan generals on board, though. They couldn't have organized an operation like this without at least some preparation beforehand."

"Showing the Eikons to the generals might have impressed them enough to get them onboard," suggested Kay, using the Imperial term for the enhanced aerial mages that had first been deployed in Arene. "Even though Ildoa was careful to stay neutral in the war before, I can't imagine its leaders were all too happy with the reveal of the Wunderwaffen. They might have jumped on the chance to get some magical supersoldiers of their own, especially since our own propaganda efforts have painted the Empire as wanting to conquer all of Europa, and Ildoa is just on their doorstep."

"No," said Agravain, frowning. "If that were the case, the justifications for joining the war would be different, similar to our own intents of curbing Imperial ambitions." The spymaster of the Round Table tapped one of the papers on the table : it was a transcript from the Ildoan declaration of war, which was filled with religious rhetoric. "There's supposed to be a difference between propaganda aimed at the population and the official correspondence between nations, but in this case they are one and the same. Whoever is pulling the strings must genuinely believe in this nonsense about the Empire getting their Wunderwaffen from Hell, meaning the Holy See actually is the one in command of this … I hesitate to use the term 'alliance', since it seems to me the Ildoan Kingdom may not have had much of a choice in the matter."

There was a moment of silence as they considered the implications of that. At the moment, those agents they did have in Ildoa were running around trying to get a clear picture of the situation at the newly opened front. And if not for the many supposedly impossible things that had already happened in the Great War, the Round Table would have discarded their preliminary reports entirely. But after what the Empire had proven capable of and what had happened in Kemet, it would be a gross dereliction of the Round Table's duties to not consider anything possible. And those reports were far from reassuring.

"So," summed up Mordred, "a military coup by religious fanatics using supersoldiers to enforce their will, and with access to whatever it was that tore a hole through the mountains and let the Ildoan Army march right into the Empire's southlands. That … I'm going to be honest, that worries me a lot. Our relations with the Holy See aren't exactly the best. That's been the case since we went our separate ways on religious matters centuries ago, and our actions during the Inquisition didn't help either. Can we say for certain that, if they defeat the Empire, they won't turn their eyes on us next ?"

"That'll be an issue for later," said Kay. "For now, I think we should focus on what's happening on the field. While the Eikons are certainly a concern, I'm far more worried about the fact that the Ildoan army apparently tore a path right through the mountains."

"That's for the Prime Minister to decide in the end," said Kay. "I have been in a meeting with him : right now, Churbull wants us to draft plans for a landing on Francois. They might never be used, but if the Ildoans manage to defeat the Empire, the Prime Minister wants us to be able to say we took part in the final victory. He's also hoping that, by showing our own strength, we'll be able to curtail this religious nonsense once the Empire is beaten and avoid a new Inquisition."

"What if it isn't nonsense ?"

The rest of the Round Table turned to look at the Royal Wizard.

"Merlin," said Agravain slowly, "are you saying that the Holy See are really acting under the direct orders of God ? I am as religious as anybody else in this room, but I find that unlikely, to say the least."

"When the Not-Man manifested in Europa a thousand years ago, it was defeated by warriors blessed by a priest," said the Royal Wizard. "When it built the Nameless City in Kemet and rampaged with its horde of monsters – assuming that was the same entity – it was the priests who led the counter-attack and banished it once more. Now, a thousand years after it was defeated for the last time and promised to return after ten centuries, the Empire's Wunderwaffen show up, followed by thaumaturgically enhanced mages who call themselves 'Holy Knights' flying under the banner of one of the world's major religions. And we still don't know how the Republic got its hands on the Holy Knights in the first place."

"I'll admit it does sound possible," said Mordred, "but there are plenty of explanations for that which don't involve literal divine intervention, even if we do take the Not-Man theory at face value. The Archbishop of Parisee vanished alongside De Lugo : it could be that religions across the ages have preserved the magical know-how to oppose the Not-Man's creations, by simple virtue of being one of the only groups with the ability to preserve information throughout the centuries."

"And what if this really is God's will ?" insisted Merlin. "What if what we see as Ildoan propaganda is nothing more than the unvarnished truth, one that we have been wilfully ignoring all this time ?"

"Then," Kay cut in, "the Empire will fall. The Wunderwaffen will be destroyed, Division Y will be dismantled, and the current incarnation of the Not-Man, whether it really is Colonel Lergen or, hell, the Kaiser himself, will be slain. If your theory is correct, then isn't that the way it has always gone ? The only difference this time is that modern technology has scaled up everything involved. If God is guiding the Holy See, then we can only have faith that, so long as we do our best, He will look kindly upon our efforts."

Slowly, Merlin nodded, appearing to calm down. The rest of the Round Table let out a quiet sigh of relief and exchanged quick glances : it was clear that they'd been putting too much pressure on the old man, asking him to uncover the secrets of the Wunderwaffen then designing counters for them. When all this was over, maybe it would be time to quietly suggest that perhaps it was time for one of his apprentices to succeed him as Royal Wizard so that he could retire.

And if God really was on their side, well, it was well-known that God helped those who helped themselves. Any political or military strategy that relied on divine intervention was beyond foolish.

---

*December 26th, 1925 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

In all of the Reich's history, thought Colonel Lergen, there must rarely have been a meeting as important to the future of the Empire as this one. Brigadier Generals Zettour and Rudersdorf were both present, along with Major Degurechaff and her aide Serebryakov. The latter two had flown straight from Castle Schwartzstein on their own power the moment they had received word of what was happening in the south. While Lieutenant Serebryakov was wearing her mask, Degurechaff's face was exposed safe for the thick glasses covering her eldritch eyes, and Lergen had never seen her look so worried, even when he'd met her in the cathedral of Arene after her first time using Kosmosblut.

To be perfectly honest, Lergen wasn't sure why he was part of this meeting, but General Zettour had asked for his presence, and he had obeyed his superior without complaint. Even now, with the Fatherland not just under threat but already harmed, the old man was still weaving his plots and deceits for the greater good of the Empire.

A map of the Empire's southern region was stretched on the table between them, with pins showing the estimated positions of armed forces belonging to both invader and defender. It painted a grim picture.

"The Southern Army is gone," began Rudersdorf, the old soldier as blunt as ever. "The Eikons destroyed its command center yesterday, and most of its units have either been eliminated or captured, with the rest withdrawing from the region. As of this morning, all of Bovaria is in enemy hands. Ladies and gentlemen, this has already been the Empire's greatest military defeat in modern times."

"The initial punch through the Alps ripped through the Southern Army's best troops, stationed there precisely in case the Ildoans decided to join the war," continued Zettour, pointing at the relevant section of the map. "It caught us completely by surprise."

"What do we know about what happened ?" asked Degurechaff.

"The reports are, for lack of a better word, confused. It all happened very quickly, and we are still piecing together what we can from the survivors who managed to escape and make contact. Here is what we know : on December 22nd, the Ildoan Army moved from its bases in Northern Ildoa. Our fortifications in the Alps picked up on the increased radio traffic and sent scouts to investigate, who promptly returned with word of the massive mobilization. The Southern Army was preparing for an attack when the magical radars started detecting the presence of mana signatures resembling those of the Eikons Division Y had sent them."

"In response, the aerial mages of the Southern Army were deployed. At the time, it was believed the Eikons only numbered around a dozen, and it was hoped that the mages could at least play for time, perhaps engage the Eikons in aerial combat and draw them into the range of the forts' anti-air guns."

It wouldn't have been ideal, and Lergen wouldn't have wanted to be in the place of the aerial mages playing cat-and-mouse with the Ildoan supersoldiers, but it was probably the best the commanders of the Southern Army could have done given the situation.

Besides, one shouldn't speak ill of the dead.

"Just as they were about to engage, however," Rudersdorf continued grimly, "many more Eikon signatures suddenly popped up among the Ildoan Army, and then one that was only briefly registered before the devices broke down. It was, according to those who spoke with the technicians, several orders of magnitude greater than the Eikons, and flared at the same time as the phenomenon which destroyed most of our Alpine fortifications and, well … opened a path right through the mountains." The General pointed at the map : "From what the mages who managed to escape told us, the passage goes from there, on the Ildoan side, to here, right in Bovaria," he tapped his finger to the edge of the Empire's southern region. "It is wide and smooth enough for the Ildoan Army to march through it at full speed : within ten hours of the blast, they were in Bovaria, and as of yesterday they have captured and occupied Bovariastadt, the regional capital."

For as long as nations had existed, mountains had served as natural borders between them. The Alps, between Ildoa and the Empire, had been perfect in that regard. It was possible for a determined army to cross them, as had legendarily been proven centuries ago by a general from the Southern Continent, but they were still a considerable obstacle to a modern army, and one that was all but impossible to break through if it were defended.

The Ildoan Army, however, had not walked through the mountains, but instead removed them from the way completely. So this was how it felt like to be on the receiving end of a superweapon changing the paradigm of warfare, mused Lergen. It wasn't pleasant at all.

"So, Major Degurechaff," said Rudersdorf, turning to the small girl among them, who wore a pair of thick sunglasses despite being indoors, and whose right arm was completely covered by a long-sleeved glove under her custom-sized uniform. "Can you tell us what the hell happened, and what we can do about it ?"

"This was a Mythos spell that the Ildoans used," she said decisively. "Something completely different from the Eikons, not just in power but also in nature."

"How can you tell ?" asked Zettour, not challenging but wanting more details.

"Because if that much rock had been vaporized by an overpowered attack spell, we would have felt it. I haven't had time to run the numbers, but I would expect violent earthquakes to wrack the entire continent, the entire region to be left in ruins, the sky to be blotted out by dust, ushering in a very cold and prolonged winter … at least." If anyone else at the table was as disturbed as Lergen by how casually the Major was speaking of such things, none of it showed on their faces. "None of that has happened, however, meaning that however the Ildoan superweapon did it, it removed everything in its way by displacing it elsewhere, while transmuting the matter on the edge of the area of effect somehow – otherwise there would have been collapses and avalanches as the rest of the mountains reacted to the changes. There are some avenues of research in Division Y that could potentially achieve that sort of result : Projekt V in particular, had we pushed its development to its logical end."

"Why didn't you ?" asked Lergen, morbidly curious.

"Because what we already had was very useful without being potentially apocalyptic," she replied without missing a beat. "And because, unlike the Holy See, we actually have regulations against risking to break the fabric of reality itself."

"Is there a possibility of that happening if the Ildoans use their weapon again ?" asked Zettour.

"Almost certainly," said Degurechaff. "But there has to be some kind of limit to that superweapon. Maybe it needs time to recharge, or can only be fired a limited numbers of time. Power like that doesn't come without cost. I dread to imagine what price Ildoa paid for something like this."

"Unfortunately," said Zettour, "we can't exactly test that, because there's a chance we'll run out of armies before they run out of charges. Which brings us back to the military situation. The bulk of the Ildoan forces is occupying the regional capital, Bovariastadt. What remains of our magical detection array in the region tells us that most Eikons are located there, as well as a mana signature we are almost sure belongs to whatever burned through the Alps."

"That's bad," murmured Degurechaff. "There are, what, half a million people in that city ?"

"A little over seven hundred thousands as of the last census, yes," clarified Zettour. Lergen wasn't surprised the older man knew the figure without needing to check. "Why do you ask ?"

"Because we are working on a timer here," she said gloomily. "From what we discovered in Francois, we suspected the Eikons to be capable of influencing the minds of others, turning them into fanatical zealots like them. The fact that Ildoa declared a Crusade against us, and that the Kingdom basically gave up its sovereignty to the Holy See, indicates that our hypothesis was correct."

"Oh," breathed Lergen as he realized where the Major was going with this. "You're thinking that all of Bovariastadt's inhabitants are in danger of being mind-controlled as well ?"

"Exactly," nodded Degurechaff. "I don't know how long it will take, but we risk the entire population being turned into crusaders, perfectly willing to die so long as they take the Empire down with them."

"That is unacceptable," Rudersdorf all but snarled. "These are our people. We need to move fast and destroy the source of that mental corruption. Much as it irks me to say so about a foreign presence in the Fatherland, the rest of the Ildoan Army is of secondary importance : we can force them off the Heimat later by conventional means. Major, what is the most extreme scenario on the table ?"

"We unseal Projekt M and use it to burn the entire region to ash," replied Degurechaff without hesitation. "In my opinion, death is preferable to such slavery. But I would rather we avoid doing that."

"… So would I," drily replied Zettour in the stunned silence that followed. "And, I assume, so would the Kaiser. Can Division Y defeat the Eikons without resorting to such drastic measures ?"

"We have twenty instances of Projekt U ready for deployment, eight of whom have already used Endlose Nacht once," listed Degurechaff. "Back on the Rhine, the Untoten were outnumbered four to one and suffered thirty percent casualties. Here, they would be outnumbered more than ten to one, and we must assume that our enemies have made some enhancements to their design by now – if nothing else, these Eikons will have had more time to grow used to their new abilities and train with them. If I use Kosmosblut, it will even the odds somewhat, but I'll probably need to keep that in reserve to deal with their 'Saint'."

Intercepted Ildoan propaganda broadcasts had revealed to them the name the Kingdom was using for its superweapon. Lergen hoped this was not literal : the idea of a person wielding that much destructive power was not one he wanted to contemplate.

"What about guerilla warfare ?" suggested Rudersdorf. "A series of small-scale engagements ?"

"No, that won't work," Lergen shook his head. "The Untoten needed Endlose Nacht to take on the Eikons. We already don't know what effects a second dose will have on those who fought on the Rhine : using it repeatedly in order to whittle away at the enemy's numbers is folly."

"I can't believe I am saying this," sighed Zettour, "but what about Projekt K, then ? The Ildoan Army has better equipment than the Dacians did, but I don't believe it would make much of a difference. At the very least it would keep the conventional troops busy, and would likely draw the attention of the Eikons as well."

"The Kinder don't have much in the way of ranged attacks," replied Degurechaff with a grimace of distaste. "The Eikons could just bombard them from afar until their regeneration gives out. Then there are the secondary effects to consider. I won't use Projekt K near Bovariastadt itself; I would rather use Projekt M."

"Then what do you propose ?" asked Rudersdorf with a wry smile. "We all know how you work by now, Major. You wouldn't have come all the way to Berun without at least an idea."

"I propose," Degurechaff took a deep breath, "that we unseal Projekt H."

There was a moment of silence. Barring possible Lieutenant Serebryakov, although Lergen wouldn't bet on it, everyone at the table knew what Projekt H was : Lergen himself had been briefed on all of Division Y's Projekte as part of his role in Operation Enigma. They also knew that there was a good reason why it had been sealed without ever being deployed in the field, when even Projekt K had been used once before the means to deploy it had been locked away.

"From what I recall of this Projekt, it would most definitely help," said Zettour slowly. "But when you stopped research on that Projekt, you told me you couldn't control it to your satisfaction."

"That was before. Things have changed now." Degurechaff rested her left hand on her right wrist, which was covered by a long glove that went all the way up to her elbow, concealing the price she had paid for her use of Kosmosblut on the Nazzadi homeworld. "Both the Untoten and the Werwölfe have reported new reactions to my presence since Arene. I believe that there is a chance Projekt H could be controlled now, or at least aimed at the enemies of the Reich."

"Even if you are right about your new ability to control the instances of Projekt H," said Lergen, "you can hardly be expected to stay near them at all times. How do you intend to control them when you aren't there ?"

Degurechaff grimaced, and Lergen felt his stomach twist in anticipation. "Our researchers believe they've found a solution to that problem. I've looked it over, and as long as the instances can be pacified by my presence long enough for them to deploy it, I think it should work."

"And what are the drawbacks ?" asked Zettour. "I know you well enough to know there must be some, Major, or you wouldn't be so hesitant."

She told them, in her usual cold, clinical tone she always used when speaking of things that would turn most people to madness. Lergen had been bracing himself for something bad, and he wasn't disappointed, although he desperately tried to pretend there wasn't a part of him whispering it could be worse.

There was a moment of silence as the three Imperial officers absorbed this latest revelation, eventually broken by General Rudersdorf :

"It will have to be volunteers," the Operations officer said. "Nothing else is acceptable."

"I know," replied the Major. "I have already found several within Division Y. All of them were briefed on the risks before volunteering."

Of course she had, reflected Lergen. They had known something related to the Eikons was happening in Ildoa, even if the scale of the issue had blind-sided them all. It was only to be expected that the Major would prepare a response to that threat.

"And … assuming this works," said Zettour. "What exactly would be your suggested course of action ?"

As the Major began to explain her plan to end the Ildoan threat to the Fatherland, Lergen was once again reminded that, no matter how much saner Degurechaff had seemingly become since working in Division Y, she was still a monster in the shape of a child – only she was the Empire's monster, and those on the other side were worse.

---

*"While the anchoring of the summoned entities to the material shells prepared for them by our engineers worked as our calculations predicted, all attempts at communication with the resulting creatures have failed. Three members of the research team have been lost during these attempts, as well as seven security guards when one of them briefly broke containment*

*before being forced back by three instances of Projekt W working together with Captain Weiss, who had recovered from his previous injury thanks to the replacement arm crafted for him by Professor Gehrman using the techniques developed for Projekt P, following the incident recorded in report 6894-A.*

*During that engagement, the instance of Projekt H displayed remarkable resilience and regeneration an order of magnitude greater than that already observed among the instances of Projekt W. It behaved in an entirely instinctive manner, lacking the intellect and malice exhibited by some of the other extra-dimensional entities affected by Elder magic and possessing instead strong fight-or-flight impulses. While this lack of intelligence played a key role in its eventual containment, it still caused considerable damage to the area, although thankfully this was taking place on the grounds, outside of Castle Schwartzstein itself.*

*By order of the Director, Projekt H is to be put on hold, and the existing instances locked within the Black Vaults until such a time as a method for control or disposal is found. In the mean time, the research and surviving personnel of Projekt H are to be transferred to Projekt K ..."*

Excerpt from an internal memo at Castle Schwartzstein regarding Projekt H, [Hüne], August 8th, 1923.

---

*"The Ildoans are here. How did they get here so fast ? What happened to our defenses ? It happened so quickly, nobody even had time to run. There are all kind of rumors running around and they are all unbelievable. The Ildoans say they are here on orders of the Holy See, that this is a Holy Crusade, that the Empire has fallen to devilry and heresy and needs to be cleansed.*

*I'm scared. At least Laetitia and the girls are with her mother in Berun. I knew I should have insisted and gone with them instead of finishing up my work here before following. I tried to contact them, but the soldiers have cut the phone lines, and they don't let anyone leave.*

*How could this happen ? I thought we were winning the war. I thought Ildoa was neutral.*

*Where are the Wunderwaffen ? No, I know the answer. The Ildoans were too fast. I doubt Berun even knows what has happened at the moment.*

*They will come. The Empire won't abandon us. The invaders will be pushed back."*

*"It looks like the Holy Knights, that's what the Ildoans say their weird mages in golden armor are called, are perched atop every tall building in the city. They are ... chanting ? Praying ? I don't know. I have a headache. It's difficult to think."*

*"Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the*

*Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord. Glory to the Lord."*

*"I just saw what I wrote earlier today. I don't remember writing it, but it is my handwriting, I'm sure of it. What is going on ?! What's wrong with me ?!"*

*"Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever.*

*Glory to the Lord, hallowed be His name, His will be done in His Kingdom, forever and ever."*

From the journal of Cavan Ehrlich, resident of Bovariastadt, December 1925.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Hello, everyone ! I'm back ! Thank you all for your patience.

No, you don't get to see the big battle. That's for the next chapter, which hopefully won't take a month to write this time (look, we all knew the frenzied speed at which I wrote the bulk of this story wasn't sustainable). I needed to do some setup. The good news is that I already have the layout of the battle written down; the bad news is that switching back and forth between this story and Ciaphas Cain, Warmaster of Chaos is a bit jarring, since the tone is quite different.

Projekt H is something people have been clamoring for me to add to this story for quite some time. I hope that I manage to do it justice. As for everyone asking about the Russy

Federation : I have a plan for them that I've been working on almost since that story blew up and grew past its initially planned six parts. That plan will start to show in the next arc of the story, and that's all you're getting (though I do look forward to your theories).

To clarify : Bovariastadt is the city of Not!Munich, with Bovaria being Not!Bavaria. Yes, I changed just one letter in the name of the region. Being lazy with the name changes is an established tradition of Youjo Senki.

If you or someone you know actually live in Munich ... well, I'm sorry. It does seem to be a very lovely city from what my cursory research has turned up.

I hope Tanya's explanation of the Saint's removing the Alps made, well, as much sense as anything in this story does. Out of story, this miracle was obviously due to Being X putting a hand on the scales. I haven't run the numbers to see whether the energy involved in displacing part of a chain of mountains would be greater than doing the same as for parting the seas (assuming the same dimensional displacement + solidification at the edges of the area of effect), but if someone with a better grasp on physics and mathematics than I want to try, feel free.

That's all for today. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and are looking forward to what happens next.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"In contrast with most previous deployments of Division Y, Operation Bildersturm was almost completely improvised once it was approved by Berun High Command. Information about the numbers and capabilities of the opposition was even scarcer than during the Defense of Kheriaha, where General Romel and Colonel Lergen had the scouting reports of their aerial mages and the testimony of the two Albish agents to go on.*

*All that was known was that a great number of Eikons were present, along with the Ildoan Army and the superweapon responsible for creating a path through the Alps. Imperial intelligence had detailed information to the Ildoan Army's capabilities, but the common soldiers weren't what was threatening the Empire.*

*Following the defeat of the Southern Army, the Ildoan troops had occupied nearly all of Bovaria. Only a handful of pockets of resistance remained by the time the operation began. The vast majority of Ildoa's men were stationed to the north of Bovariastadt, having established defensive positions there.*

*Bringing the Wunderwaffen into position was also more of a challenge than previously, as the entire Bovaria region was either occupied by the Ildoan Army or in chaos. However, with the help of General Zettour, the Director was able to secure passage through the railway network for the nine instances of Projekt H that were completed in time for the operation. Given the size of the Hünen, only the heaviest railways were capable of transporting them, but thankfully the Imperial efforts to facilitate logistics within the Fatherland allowed the battle group to get within striking distance of Bovariastadt. The Untoten and aerial mages flew ahead of the train during the move, ensuring the lack of Ildoan presence and the integrity of the railroad.*

*Operation Bildersturm began three hours after sundown, in order to take maximum advantage of the excellent night vision of Division Y's supersoldiers and remove the risk of exposure to sunlight for the instances of Projekt U that were deployed."*

Excerpt from the final Division Y report and tactical analysis of Operation Bildersturm, added to the records on February 12th, 1926.

---

*January 3rd, 1926 – Outskirts of Bovariastadt*

Colonel Virginio Calandro, of the Ildoan Army, marched along the edge of his troops' fortifications, such as they were. The flatlands surrounding Bovariastadt made for poor defensive terrain, and there was only so much digging trenches, building watchtowers and assembling bunkers could do. They shouldn't be holding position here, not when the Imperial Army must be using every ounce of its considerable ability to gather a counter to their invasion. They shouldn't even be here in the first place –

They should –

They should –

He shook his head, fighting off a rising headache. They should be attacking, yes, that was it. Sitting still and waiting for the enemy to come to them felt wrong. They were the chosen of God, bringing His Light into lands that had been left to wallow into darkness for far too long. They should be on the offensive. But the orders had come from the top, from those chosen by His Holiness himself to lead this glorious Holy Crusade. As a colonel, Calandro was blessed to have been told the reasoning behind their holding position.

While the ultimate goal of the Crusade was the liberation of the Empire from the corruption that had claimed it, the greatest obstacle toward that hallowed objective was the arch-heretic who led Division Y, the source of all Imperial Wunderwaffen and the root of heresy.

The witch, the spawn of the Devil that went by the name of Tanya Degurechaff, would not, could not, tolerate the Crusaders' presence onto Imperial soil, for by their very presence they denied her evil and brought light into the darkness that shrouded the Empire and blinded its people to the corruption she spread through her blasphemous works. Her influence depended on the image of invincibility she had built by crushing those who were ignorant of her true nature and lacking in the blessings of the Lord which were needed to send her back to the pit out of which she'd crawled.

She had to respond to their challenge, had to pick up the gauntlet they had thrown in her face. And if by chance she didn't, rightly afraid of the might of God's chosen, then she would still lose. The people of Bovariastadt would be illuminated, and once they saw the truth, the shame of their sins would drive them to join the Crusade, and they would repeat the process elsewhere, until the witch was cornered in her lair, surrounded by the liberated Empire.

Suddenly, cries of alarm rose from the soldiers around him. A wall of fog was advancing toward the trenches at great speed, despite the lack of wind. Calandro immediately recognized what was happening : this was the foul sorcery that had befallen the Osfjord months ago, and heralded the downfall of the Legadonian Entente. He took hold of the closest radio, and bellowed :

"We are under attack ! The enemy is here !"

He got back half of a reply, then the fog reached the command center, and the transmission cut off. Cursing, Calandro turned to the soldiers he could still see :

"Get ready, men ! The heretics are coming, and it falls to us to send them to Hell where they belong !"

The soldiers responded with commendable alacrity, but Calandro couldn't help a flicker of unease. The Imperial sorcery had effectively nullified the greatest advantage of their defensive positions : the terrain would have made a great killing field for their machine guns and artillery, but without visibility they were rendered almost useless.

The Colonel's moment of unworthy doubt ended with the sound of great wings beating, as a Holy Knight descended from the heavens to land alongside the soldiers, his arrival met with silent awe. The Holy Knight raised his spear, blazing with divine fire, and the malevolent mist recoiled, burned away by the holy radiance. Around Calandro, the men cheered, and he joined his voice to their chorus –

There was a flash of light, then the sound of thunder as the world around the Ildoan Colonel vanished. He blinked as his consciousness returned, trying to orient himself. There was dirt all over him, along with multiple scratches where flying debris had torn through his uniform, but nothing his faith in the Lord couldn't carry him through.

He was luckier than the other soldiers who had been in the trench with him : none of them appeared to have survived the attack, whatever it had been. The blasphemous fog had returned in force, but he still saw the Holy Knight – or what remained of him.

Calandro's heart dropped at the sight of the hallowed warrior's remains, his armor melted and his blessed flesh scattered through the mud. Righteous hatred then filled him at the sight, and he drew his pistol before turning back in the direction of the unseen enemy, determined to make the heretics pay for their sins.

Then, through the mists, he saw a tall, horned figure draw near. He aimed at its head … then it grew larger. And larger. And larger still, with the earth trembling with each of its momentous footsteps. Despite everything the Colonel knew, his blood ran cold as the true size of the approaching horror became apparent. It was huge, larger than any warmachine Calandro had ever seen. He barely came up to the silhouette's ankle, which from what he could see of it through the mist was covered in metal.

And in the distance, he could hear more titanic footsteps, along with more thunderous booms. How many of these hellish giants had the Empire called forth from the infernal pits ? And how could they hope to stand against them ?

It was all a mistake. They shouldn't have come here. How many soldiers had already died ? They didn't need to come here, they –

They –

They –

They had to fight, no matter how terrible the odds may be. Even now, more Holy Knights were coming to strike down the heretics' creations. No one had ever promised that fighting the good fight would be easy, and in this holy war, the souls of the worthy would be separated from those of the chaff through the crucible of sacred conflict.

Calandro heard the inhuman howling of lesser hellspawns growing louder through the muffling fog, and demented laughter echoed down from above. He saw frost spread on the mud, making him realize the cold he felt wasn't due to the weakness of his mortal spirit.

With a prayer on his lips, Virginio Calandro prepared to die for his God.

*"Once the Director announced the beginning of Operation Bildersturm, Projekt N was deployed in order to reduce enemy visibility and suppress their communications. Given the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Ildoans, preventing them from coordinating was absolutely crucial, even though the Ildoan Army was only a secondary concern next to Operation Bildersturm's true objectives.*

*The supernatural fog swept across the defensive positions, driven by the will of the Division Y occultists. Five time as many occultists were involved in this process as had been during the previous deployment of Projekt N at Osfjord, for not only was the targeted area much larger due to how spread out the Ildoan Army was, there was a chance that the Eikons would be able to dispel the fog, leading to a contest of wills between the Ildoan supersoldiers and the occultists.*

*In order to get as many occultists trained in the deployment of Projekt N and to have those participating at full strength, no Rite of Union was performed during the full moon of late December 1925. At the request of Director Degurechaff, additional medical personnel and supplies were transferred to Castle Schwartzstein to assist Doctor Iosefka in keeping the candidates for induction into Projekt W alive during this delay – though it was expected that not all of them would survive until the next chance to perform the Rite and grant them a shot at restoration.*

*This hypothesis would prove to be correct, as numerous Eikon-type mana signatures were detected within Bovariastadt soon after the deployment of Projekt N, quickly moving in its direction. With the presence of the Eikons confirmed, Colonel Lergen, acting as Director Degurechaff's representative, gave the order for the rest of the offensive to begin. The twenty Untoten who had been gathered for the operation all immediately ingested their assigned doses of Endlose Nacht and took to the skies to meet the Eikons, while the Werwölfe charged, advancing in the shadows of the nine instances of Projekt H that had been completed in time for the operation ..."*

---

*January 3rd, 1926 – Outskirts of Bovariastadt*

Frieda strode the battlefield like a titan of ancient legend, and despite all that was at stake in this battle, she couldn't suppress the part of her that exalted at the power she commanded in that moment.

Her mount was clad in thick tank plating, and the two mages on its shoulders were ready to cast shields capable of turning aside artillery shells at a moment's notice. Getting the armor completed on all nine Hünen had been a challenge even for the engineers of Division Y, who were used to being asked to do the impossible. But thanks to the logistical sorcery of General Zettour (which frankly, in her Frieda's opinion, was as awe-inspiring as anything she had witnessed in Castle Schwartzstein) and some repurposed Nazzadi spells meant for navigating their ruined homeworld, they had managed it. Who knew what civilian uses these spells could have, if only the war effort didn't consume every available resource.

It was still a rush job, and the engineers were likely going to start working on a better version as soon as they woke up from the coma they had collapsed into after the task force departure (none of them had slept in three days by that point in order to get everything ready on time).

But, rushed or not, the armor certainly was as effective as it was impressive. She knew what the Hüne looked like seen from the ground : a horned giant of blackened steel, nearly eighteen meters tall, its metallic skin inscribed with blazing sigils. Yet the feats of engineering that had gone into preparing the Wunderwaffe's exterior paled in comparison to those which had wrought the means to control it.

The piloting chamber in which Frieda was strapped was tight to the point of claustrophobia. Prior to its implantation within the Hüne's flesh, it had been a metallic ovoid, covered in engraved sigils and circuitry. The seat directly under her had been taken off a fighter plane's assembly line, and each of her hands rested on a D-24 computation orb with a custom suite of spells that let her pilot the Wunderwaffe.

The control interface was the result of months of work by the researchers who had been part of Projekt H before its sealing by the Director, but who had continued searching for ways to make use of the results of their previous work during what was supposed to be their off-hours. Eventually, they had managed to come up with a design suitable to present to their boss, who, in the wake of Projekt S' failure and the following events in Kemet, had decided to approve its construction.

Not that Frieda could see the inside of the chamber at the moment, of course. Her vision was overridden by the Hüne's own senses, though to call what it perceived 'sight' was to do it a grave disservice. Her human brain was just interpreting signals from senses no living creature on Earth possessed, which were heavily filtered by the interfacing spells, in a way she could understand.

The fog of Projekt N was no obstacle to the combined perceptions of the Hüne, allowing her to see the battlefield in what the Director had called 'thermal vision' when it had been described to her following the command interface's testing. Focusing on a single enemy brought to mind a flurry of details, such as their gender, general age and state of health (during testing, they had accidentally discovered one of the researchers had a latent disease that had seen him immediately sent to Doctor Iosefka for treatment). She could also hear radio signals if she made the effort to listen, although it didn't help break through the Ildoan Army's encryption. Her own mana detection was overlaid above this weird landscape, showing her the mages of Division Y blazing bright and the Untoten as dark shadows.

And along with those perceptions came the Hüne's own thoughts, simple and bestial but present nonetheless. The creatures the Projekt had summoned into existence had been unaffected by their confinement, rousing from slumber as the heavy doors of their vault were opened. Instead of immediately attacking, however, they had reacted to the Director's presence in much the same way hounds might respond to the presence of their master, although nobody sane would have compared the sounds they'd made to a dog's bark.

With the Director keeping the Hünen peaceful, the occultists had been able to install the command interfaces, and Frieda had gotten her first taste of her mount's mind. It wasn't sentient, that much had been obvious. Much like the researchers had suspected, the Hünen were smart animals with alien instincts, who did not understand the world around them. Through the guidance of a human mind, however, they could remain calm even without the Director's presence to cow them.

Right now, the Hüne felt … 'happy' probably wasn't the right word. Pleased, that was it. It was enjoying the frigid temperatures caused by the entropic presence of several Untoten using Endlose Nacht in the skies above. The deathless mages were raining entropic spells across the Ildoan lines, turning entire squads of soldiers to dust with every shot. Even with them several hundred meters above, their collective presence was still causing the temperature across the front to plummet, creating thin sheets of ice that shattered with every step of her Hüne.

Frieda was well aware of how this all looked. Giant, horned figures emerging from a fog that advanced against the wind, while a menagerie of smaller monsters ran ahead and undead blood-drinkers laughed madly while flying in the cloud-filled skies and sending weaponized death unto hapless soldiers ? Even the greatest Imperial propagandist would have struggled to make them look like the heroes of this battle.

But that was fine by her. She had learned that the glory of war was nothing but an illusion months ago on the Rhine Front, watching her fellow cadets slaughtered like chaff by the Republic. She and Warren were the only survivors of their entire graduation class – the rest hadn't even been left intact enough to be inducted into Projekt U. Warren had survived thanks to becoming a Werwolf, while she had escaped that hell by being transferred to Division Y after the rest of her unit had died and some bureaucrat somewhere had decided she would be more useful in Castle Schwartzstein than in the trenches.

That transfer had saved Frieda's life, and she had thrown herself into her new duties, determined to prove it had been the right decision for the Empire, not just for herself. She had gone through Major Degurechaff's hellish training with only as much complaining as the other, older mages, and learned to use the D-24 enough to pull her weight in security operations. And when the Director had gathered the aerial mages under her command and told her about Projekt H and what it required, she had volunteered, alongside every single one of her colleagues.

War was ugly, cruel, monstrous and merciless, in ways the horrors with which Division Y dabbled could never hope to match. The only reason to participate in it was to defend yourself and, more importantly, the ones you cared about. Everything else was just vainglory.

And then she felt them, at the edge of her perception and swiftly approaching. There they were : the reason for the unsealing of Projekt H, and the root cause of the Empire's current woes.

The Eikons.

Their mana signature was a raging pyre in her senses, burning so bright – too bright. It was a foreign, alien fire that consumed everything the Eikons had been before their transformation, using the spark of their immortal souls as kindling for the blaze. She tasted bile in her mouth and felt pain in her hands as she gripped the D-24s too strongly and her body locked in place, anger not entirely her own filling her mind. She needed to extinguish that fire, to silence that awful song –

"Wotjek, are you alright ?" The voice of Lieutenant König, reaching her through the communication spell, suddenly returned her to her senses.

"I – yes," she replied. "Just surprised. The Hüne doesn't like the Eikons at all."

"Hmm. Interesting. I don't think the Werwölfe reported something like that at the Rhine."

"Worry about that later," cut in Neumann. "They are coming !"

He was right : a trio of Eikons were plunging toward her, hurling spears of magical lightning. She felt König and Neumann react, their training kicking in before conscious thought could even register the attack. Together, they deployed a shield right in time to intercept the attack.

Even through the Hüne's senses, Frieda could tell the shield was very different from what aerial mages always used on the battlefield. Standard magical barriers used the caster's mana to create a bubble which was impassable to solid projectiles and magic alike, with the strength of the caster directly proportionate to the barrier's resilience. From the outside, they looked like a translucent sphere, barely visible when it wasn't actively blocking something if you couldn't sense the mana involved.

The two lieutenants' spell, cast through their D-24s, was an entirely different beast. Following the events of Arene, the Director had ordered the researchers of Division Y to develop counters to the Eikons that didn't involve the use of Kosmosblut and Endlose Nacht. The attempt to figure out a way to cancel the enhancements bestowed upon the Eikons by whatever foul process created them had failed, but the researchers' work hadn't been completely fruitless. After many sleepless, coffee-fuelled nights (there was a reason the drink was joked to have its own line in Division Y's budget reports), they had designed a spell formula that should allow an aerial mage to stand up to the far greater mana output of the Eikons.

König and Neumann were powerful mages, but they couldn't have hoped to withstand repeated bombardment from the Eikons using a standard mage shell : they might have been able to block one or two attacks, but that would be it. Instead, the spell they used briefly tore open a hole in the very fabric of reality. For a length of time less than the blink of an eye, there was a vast span of nothing between Frieda's mount and the Eikons, which swallowed the attack, sending it to another dimension with only a minimal expense of mana.

It was difficult to cast. It required incredible timing and coordination in order to intercept the attack (König had compared it to shooting a bullet out of the air). And should the casters get distracted and lose control at the same time, the consequences could be catastrophic. If not for the Major's relentless training, no one would have even thought it possible to achieve with any degree of consistency.

But boy, did it look impressive. Especially when perceived through a Hüne's supernatural senses : human eyes simply saw total blackness when the spell was used, and mages perceived mana at the edge of the two-dimensional affected area and absolutely nothing inside it. But her mount could sense the gaping hole in reality, and hear the skittering things that dwelled on the other side as they screamed on wavelengths no man-made device could ever pick up.

The two mages were, of course, keeping up their own personal barrier spells at the same time, just in case an Ildoan sharpshooter decided to try to snipe them. The casting prowess of the

D-24 was, as always, leagues above anything the rest of the world possessed – well, except for the Eikons, but as far as the researchers who had performed the dissection of the captured specimens had been able to tell, they didn't need any arcane catalyst to use their prodigious mana reserves.

"Now !" called out König as the shield dropped, and Frieda prepared to fire back.

While the Hünen had been dangerous before being sealed away, their current combat prowess dwarfed anything they'd been capable of before. It would take much more than a few Werwölfe and an (admittedly gifted) aerial mage to take them down now.

The Hüne's left arm ended in a monstrous claw capable of erupting into tentacles, not too dissimilar to that of the Nightmare-type Werwolf (who was also part of the operation, somewhere else in the fog). And in its right hand, it held a scaled-up version of the energy rifle of Division Y's infantry, called the M-625 cannon. The weapon was wholly fused to the limb's armor, with the upper arm bearing the power generator from which came the massive surge of current that ran through the blue crystal in the cannon's main body.

With a thought, Frieda raised the cannon toward the three Eikons, casting a modified targeting spell to ensure her shot would hit. Then she triggered the weapon, and a beam of cerulean light the width of an artillery shell erupted, momentarily blinding her. When her vision cleared, nothing remained of the three Ildoan supersoldiers.

"Something is wrong," said König. "Where are the Ildoan mages ? The Eikons might be faster, but we should be able to detect their mana signatures by now."

"Haven't they all been turned into Eikons ?" Frieda sent back while firing another beam of energy at a pack of Eikons that were bombarding another Hüne to her left. Two of the Ildoan supersoldiers vanished, while the third fell down, a chunk of his body missing.

"If that were the case, we would have heard something about it before they declared this stupid Crusade. After what happened in Francois, our intelligence agents in Ildoa knew to be on the lookout for any suspicious disappearance or 'reassignment'. So either they really dropped the ball, or …"

"Or the Kingdom's aerial mages are somewhere else," finished Neumann grimly. "Great. As if we needed something else to worry about."

"The Director will know what to do," said Frieda, commanding her mount to advance while also unleashing its left arm's tentacles to reduce an Ildoan tank trying to ram its ankles to scrap. "For now, let's make sure our part of the plan works."

---

*"The combined deployment of Projekte Nebel, Werwölfe, Untoten and Hünen (the greatest number of different Projekte having ever been deployed simultaneously) proved to be every bit as effective as had been hoped for. Despite the mind-bending influence of the Eikons preventing the soldiers from panicking, the Ildoan lines collapsed immediately.*

*The Werwölfe's ability to sense each other's presence was unaffected by Projekt N (as was established during testing, see report N-W-8 for more details). With the Ildoan artillery either disabled by Projekt N or focusing its fire on the Hünen, the Werwölfe were free to move through the Ildoan trenches unopposed, the Ildoan infantry doing as little to slow them down as all unaugmented troops had in previous engagements. The new Nightmare and Efreet types especially proved devastatingly effective, each amounting for hundreds of enemy kills with their wide-range attacks.*

*Scores of Eikons joined the battle (post-battle counts would put their total number in the invading force at over two hundreds). They were more disciplined than during previous encounters, and the Untoten who had fought them on the Rhine Front later confirmed that their skills were greater too, not just their mana output. Either because of this or due to the indoctrination of the Ildoans, there were no repeat of the friendly fire incidents noted during the Eikons' second deployment.*

*While the attack had drawn all enemy eyes, the absence of the Director among the combatants combined with the confusion of the frontline successfully kept the superweapon responsible for opening a passage through the Alps from firing. With this confirmed, the second part of Operation Bildersturm began ..."*

---

*January 3rd, 1926 – Imperial City Bovariastadt*

Before the start of the operation, Zerayah had been sent ahead of the main force, slipping into Bovariastadt under the cover of early night. She had volunteered for the mission, alongside a handful of other mages. She was the only Nazzadi of the group, having successfully argued that her experience sneaking around in environments full of monsters who could kill her immediately if they found her could be used in the Eikon-infested city. Eventually, the Director had agreed to give her this chance to prove herself.

She had stayed in the shadows, avoiding to use even a flicker of magic, knowing the Eikons would detect her at once if she did so. And even though she had only been here for a couple hours and had never been in a proper city before (the village near Castle Schwartzstein was tiny by comparison, even if it held more people than she had seen in her entire life before the Lady of Stars had saved her people), it was obvious things were deeply, deeply wrong in Bovariastadt.

Despite the late hour and the sounds of battle coming from the north, the streets were bustling. There were thousands of people outside, but they weren't going anywhere : they were standing in the streets, or kneeling on the pavement, chanting what Zerayah was fairly sure were prayers (she had been introduced to the concept of religion only recently, and while not forbidden it wasn't exactly encouraged within Division Y). The same prayers, repeated over and over by men, women and children with wide, bloodshot eyes, all of whom looked exhausted.

This was the indoctrination Lieutenant König had uncovered during his investigation in the land of Francois and that Zerayah had been warned about. It was unsettling in the extreme : even after all that Zerayah had witnessed in her life, she had never seen something like it. The

monsters of Nazza-Duhni had killed and mutilated, but not even Akhar-Zegog had been able of such violation of its victims' mind.

She had caught glimpses of fearful faces looking out of windows at the gatherings before hastily pulling the curtains back. So at least not everyone was affected yet, but it was poor consolation for those already lost. She hoped the Director would find a way to help them.

When she heard the sounds of distant battle, she took to the air. Now that the Eikons had moved out to meet the attack, she could fly with less risks of being shot down, and the mess of mana signatures that so many Eikons had created was starting to clear. Across the city, the other infiltrators were doing the same. They had spread out to maximize the area covered : it was imperative to the operation that the target be located as swiftly as possible.

As she flew, she suppressed the awe and wonder she felt at the sight of so many buildings standing up all around her. Even now, after months (and it had taken a while for her to get used to actually measuring the passage of time, too) in this new, strange and beautiful world, it still felt alien to not be surrounded by ruins, to not wake up wondering if this was the day she failed and got herself (or worse, those who relied on her for leadership) killed.

Now wasn't the time to get distracted, however, because if she messed up, people would die. As she moved, she kept sending scanning pulses, looking for – there.

The building where she had detected the anomalous mana signal was taller than those around it, and much older too. It was clearly a temple of some sort – the Nazzadi still didn't really get the concept of religion, and it hadn't been a priority to teach them. Two spires rose from the main body of the building, and a platform of wodden beams and metal had been constructed between them. And on that platform, surrounded by a golden sphere of magic far stronger than anything Zerayah was capable of, was the 'Saint' of the Ildoan crusade.

This was the weapon that had removed the mountains blocking the path of the invaders. Having seen mountains for the first time when she had walked outside of Castle Schwartzstein, Zerayah couldn't conceive of anything so powerful – but then, she couldn't have imagined anyone powerful enough to defeat Akhar-Zegog either.

She raised her right arm and poured her energy into the flare gun she had been given. When she pulled the trigger, the sky above her position was marked with a bright star, signalling the location of the Ildoan 'superweapon'. Only then, with her duty discharged, did she dare to fly closer, to see if there was anything she could do to help disable it -

No. Not 'it', she realized with horror.

'She.'

It was a child. A girl, barely the same age as the Director appeared to be – no, younger. She was wearing ornate robes and holding what looked like a computation orb in both hands. And her face … Even the indoctrinated children Zerayah had seen amidst the praying crowds had more life in their faces. There was just nothing there. Nothing at all. If the child had detected Zerayah's approach, she gave absolutely no sign of it.

Behind the girl, she saw a man in a white lab coat that reminded her of the researchers at Castle Schwartzstein. He held a staff in his hands made of gilded clockwork and whirring with magical energy. It served a similar purpose as her orb, except that from what Zerayah could sense, the man before her was no mage. Instead of providing mana to the device himself, he was drawing it from somewhere, something else. And the energy had the same feel as that of the empty-eyed child.

In her life (which was long by the standards of her people, yet short by those of her new, adopted homeland), Zerayah had known anger many times. Nazza-Duhni was a world that gave many reasons for fury. Never had she felt such rage as in this moment.

"How dare you ?!" she howled.

The old man turned and ran, fleeing down the closest spire. Zerayah landed on the platform and gave chase, but despite his age, the man was fast. In fact, he was running down the stairs so fast it was a miracle he hadn't fallen down and broken his miserable skull. She would still have caught up quickly, except the moment she entered the spire in pursuit, her mana suddenly felt sluggish and unresponsive – and then, a voice boomed into her head, each word like a hammer blow. She stumbled, nearly falling to the ground, as the voice that was a voice in the same way the Saint was a child spoke :

*WORTHLESS*

*HERETIC*

*KNEEL*

"I AM ZERAYAH !" she screamed as she plunged her own knife into her left hand, the pain clearing her mind from the abominable voice. "DAUGHTER OF NAZZA-DUHNI ! WARRIOR OF THE LADY OF STARS ! AND I DO NOT KNEEL !"

She ripped the knife from her own flesh, aiming its blood-dripping blade at the old man. He raised his staff, gleaming with golden light.

"Vade Retro, Satanas !" he bellowed, eyes wide with zealous hatred. "You have no place in this House of God !"

The young Nazzadi woman snarled wordlessly in response, and started to walk closer, determination pushing back the alien influence trying to make her stop and drop to her knees. She had spent her entire life running from monster. Magic or not, wounded or not, eldritch pressure or not, she would not run from the one before her.

She was going to kill him.

---

*January 3rd, 1926 – Imperial City Bovariastadt – Frauenkirche*

On the other side of Bovariastadt from where the combined forces of Division Y were attacking the Ildoan Army, Tanya Degurechaff saw Zerayah's signal, and immediately

injected herself with her third dose of Kosmosblut. She and a group of select companions had made their way around the city undetected, and now it was time for them to play their part in Operation Bildersturm – and, should they fail, all that had been done before would be for naught.

Sensing the sudden surge of power from the south, the Eikons that had been kept in reserve at the city's walls by the lords of the crusade flew toward the Lady of Stars, while the skies above the city roiled with black and golden clouds as opposed eldritch influences clashed. Half a hundred Holy Knights stood between the Lady and her destination, each remade in one of the holiest sites in the world, their mana output further enhanced by the ministrations of Doctor Schugel. They were the fist of the Lord whom they served body and soul, and the aerial mage corps of whole countries would have broken before their might.

But the Lady of Stars flew with her moonlight blade in hand, and her trusted companions at her side. Zerayah wasn't the only Nazzadi to have sworn herself to the one who had freed them from their miserable existence : eight charcoal-skinned mages flew alongside the Lady of Stars, holding a D-24 computation orb and blazing with power. The Nazzadi couldn't match the Eikons one-on-one, but they worked together to target those who made it through the Lady of Stars' defenses or tried to flank her. Spell formulas designed to repel the monsters of their homeworld and improved to Imperial standards disrupted the mana of the false angels, sending them crashing down into the city below.

And there too was Lieutenant Serebryakov, her second dose of Endlose Nacht fuelling her deathless might, along with the blood of her mistress she had drunk just before the battle. The exiled Russy mage cut a figure nigh as terrible as her superior's, haloed in the black light of a collapsed sun's hunger that also filled her eyes. The Nazzadi had to stay clear of her to avoid freezing to death, as the very air around her plunged to nearly sub-zero temperatures, causing a rain of ice crystals to follow her as she advanced. She was kept from frenzy only by the close proximity of the Lady of Stars, whose presence served as an anchor to the Untote's sanity, but this made her no less terrifying.

Death itself was at her command, the effects of Endlose Nacht amplified by the Director's altered vitae to create a demigoddess of darkness and entropy, however briefly. Spears of un-light erupted from her hands, turning Eikons to dust in a single heartbeat, and her fangs tore through their armor without pause, her strength far above that of the Eikons despite being half their size. The only thing holding Viktoriya back was having to be careful to avoid landing her spells in the city.

The Eikons fought well, better than the ones the Lady of Stars had slaughtered during the Eclipsed Liberation. But it wasn't enough. They died in droves, the survivors sent crashing down into the streets while the attackers kept moving. However, they didn't need to win. The Congregation's plan to deal with the Lady of Stars had always rested on their ultimate weapon : all the Eikons had to do was hold her at bay long enough. When the mana within the cathedral suddenly spiked, the Lady of Stars abandoned caution and rushed ahead, her companions opening a path for her and keeping the remaining Eikons from striking at her back while she flew at full speed, flying above the river that cut Bovariastadt in two and would have stopped her undead allies in any case.

The rush of her passage shattered windows and sent small objects flying, yet as the energy reached its crescendo, it seemed she wasn't going to be fast enough.

The Saint gathered power that wasn't hers, her body moving in response to alien compulsions. But before she could fire the terrible weapon which would unmake the Lady of Stars, her allies, and half of Bovariastadt, the lifeblood of Adelheid von Schugel was spilled on the altar below her as Zerayah, wounded and exhausted from her battle with the mad scientist's Eikon bodyguard but still victorious and vengeful. By this singular act, the cathedral's consecration was thrown out of alignment, and - just for a moment – the Saint hesitated.

The Lady of Stars could have seized that opening to strike down the vessel of her hated adversary's power. Indeed, her rational side screamed at her to do just that, to weigh the costs and benefits and make the obviously correct choice. Yet much as she denied it, even to herself, the soul that was Tanya Degurechaff had changed, perhaps as much as the flesh hosting it. She had gained comrades she trusted, and a much better understanding of people. As a result, her own emotions had grown, and though she was not and would never be 'normal' (whatever that word might mean), she was no longer the cold-blooded fiend who, once upon a time, had so scared Eric von Lergen.

And the person she had become would not kill a child, even to save the Empire. The moonlight blade came down, and struck at the Trinity's Tear with a sound like the pealing of heavenly bells cracking. As magical energy arced around the two of them, melting the ancient stone of the church and warping reality to the point that, had anyone else stood close by, they would have been ripped apart, the Lady of Stars locked her star-filled eyes with the Saint's empty gaze, and spoke :

**"WHO ARE YOU ?"**

And as she spoke those words, holding firm at the center of a vortex of unearthly power, the entire city heard them.

---

**"WHO ARE YOU ?"**

*He is Cavan Ehrlich, citizen of the Empire. He is husband to a wonderful woman and father to two beautiful daughters, and now he realizes he hasn't thought about them in far too long.*

*He is kneeling in the streets, in clothes he has been wearing for the last two days, since he left his home to join the crowd massed in the streets. His throat hurts from all the chanting and praying he has been doing without pause for the last day or so.*

*He remembers praying, singing the praises of God. He remembers vowing to join the Crusade, to purge all heresy from the Empire. He remembers the thoughts that ran through his mind then, as he heard the Holy Knights' endless song.*

*He would scream, if his vocal chords didn't hurt so much.*

**"WHO ARE YOU ?"**

*He is Dominico Ricci, soldier of the Ildoan Army. Like most of his comrades-in-arms, he was conscripted when the Great War began and the Kingdom started to prepare for the worst. Before the Holy Crusade was declared, he didn't think he was going to see action, and he was perfectly fine with that. When he was young, his grandfather told him of his own experience with war, and even though he knows the old man held back from telling him the really messed up stuff, it was still enough to give him nightmares.*

*He realizes that he forgot about that at some point.*

*Dominico looks at his rifle. He remembers long days spent training on the range with it, improving his accuracy until he was the best shot in his squad. He remembers feeling proud of that.*

*He remembers shooting Imperial soldiers trying to surrender with it during the march through the Alps. He remembers the feeling of absolute righteousness he felt as he pulled the trigger, the utter certitude that he was doing God's work.*

*Dominico screams as he throws his rifle away like it just turned into a snake. Then he collapses on the street, weeping and puking, ashamed and horrified.*

**"WHO ARE YOU ?"**

*She is Nala, daughter of Onika. She lies in the street, surrounded by broken stone, her golden armor dented, her magic-charged blood seeping out of a dozen different injuries.*

*When she tested positive for magical potential, she was promised a better life by the men of the Church, as well as food and medicine for her village. The local priest was always kind and helpful to her people, so she accepted the offer. They took her away from her home in one of the Francois colonies on the Southern Continent, and trained her to use her gifts.*

*When she was ready, they called her and eleven others out of the training barracks and into the most grandiose building she had ever seen. She listened as the Francois priest spoke. She felt the Light descend from on high and wrap itself around her, before ...*

*Before ...*

*She remembers now. She didn't want this. This is not what she agreed to. She isn't stupid : she knew her village's colonial overlords wanted soldiers. She was willing to accept that, even if it meant becoming a killer, so long as her people gained from it.*

*But that is not what happened. The Congregation didn't train her into a mage. They tried to destroy everything she was, and turn her into an obedient puppet. A soldier is supposed to protect, and she has not protected. A soldier is supposed to follow the laws of war, and she has not done so. She has burned and slaughtered; she has enslaved and destroyed. And as she did so, she thought it good.*

*Nala screams, and her burning wings shift to the color of moonlight, while her golden armor blackens to the color of soot.*

---

**"WHO ARE YOU ?"**

Atop the cathedral of Bovariastadt, the little girl who had been taken from the orphanages of the Holy See and remade into a weapon by the rites of Archbishop Beauvais and the ministrations of Doctor Schugel cried out, in a heart wrenching sob. Everything she was had been erased by golden light, down to her very name. But the spark of free will that makes humans what they are was still there, for while it can be caged, shackled, and tormented to the point of breaking, it can never be truly erased – not without destroying that which the Lord of Heavens required in His chosen.

Now that spark fought back, kindled by the eldritch light of the Lady of Stars, and the nameless child screamed. She would never remember what was taken from her, for the light had burned it completely. But in that moment, she took back her agency, and in doing so was the Saint no longer. She let go of the accursed orb, the Trinity's Tear, and recoiled from it, collapsing on her back, her body wracked by sobs. Still the cracked Trinity's Tear hung in the air, pulsating with divine power, a gateway to the Kingdom of Heaven that flared through the eldritch sky like a false sun.

The Lady of Stars howled her defiance to the face of Him Who Watches, and pushed her moonlight blade down, cutting through the holy relic. Antithetical energies met. The connection was severed, and the radiant, scourging light vanished as if a cosmic switch had just been flicked. The girl who had been rendered nameless shuddered in relief as the presence of her tormentor was banished, while across the city, the citizens who had been affected the most by the Eikons' presence fell blissfully unconscious.

But power cannot be so easily unmade. Reality buckled, then started to crack. With a titanic effort of will, the Lady of Stars redirected the disruption upward before it could swallow the city and drag it into some other-dimensional abyss. The heavens themselves were torn, a scar upon Creation that would linger like the memory of a stab wound.

---

*"The destruction of the Ildoan Mythos-based computation orb effectively disabled the remaining Eikons, as well as entire swathes of the Ildoan Army. Whole companies surrendered or were no longer in any state to continue fighting, leading to Operation Bildersturm winding down. The forces of Division Y advanced to complete the liberation of Bovariastadt, but were far too few in numbers to prevent those Ildoans still in possession of their wits from fleeing.*

*This, of course, had been anticipated. The thought of tens of thousands of foreign soldiers loose in Bovaria was not one High Command enjoyed, but it was very much the lesser of two evils. With little knowledge as to the mechanisms of the Eikons' indoctrination abilities, preparations had been made for every scenario from an ordered retreat to a fanatical last stand, even mass suicide or an attempt to purge Bovariastadt's civilian population (which was partly why Division Y moved immediately to secure the city). Elements of the Northern and Western Armies were on the move, waiting for news of Operation Bildersturm's success before proceeding to reclaim the region.*

*The lifting of the indoctrination that occurred following the Director's confrontation with the Saint was closer to the best-case scenario than anyone had thought likely, though this did not*

*come without its own problems. The Ildoan Army reacted to their sudden freedom in various ways, with a not insignificant portion beginning to flee back to their homeland. There was little Division Y could do to stop them, but while the Reich had little reason to object to the departure of common troopers, there were those trying to flee who couldn't be allowed to escape ..."*

---

*January 3rd, 1926 – Somewhere to the south of Bovariastadt*

Corporal Karla Vogt watched as her target emerged from the burning wreckage of the car she had hit with a carefully thrown grenade. Now that she had taken her Widow form, she couldn't smile, but she really wanted to.

When the preparations for Operation Bildersturm had been made, Colonel Lergen had raised the risk of the ringleaders escaping. The Operation's focus, after all, was to deal with the superweapon which had opened a path through the Alps. But if the individuals responsible for the Holy See and the Kingdom of Ildoa's sudden descent into religious mania escaped, they could potentially start over elsewhere.

They hadn't been sure the ringleaders had accompanied the Ildoan Army, but the chance that they had needed to be addressed. Which was why Karla wasn't with the other Werwölfe tearing through the Ildoan soldiers, but was instead here.

And that precaution had paid off, because she had recognized one of her primary targets among the handful of Ildoan high-ranking officers who were fleeing south aboard that car : Pierre-Michel de Lugo, the man widely decried by his own home country as responsible for the utter disaster that had been the performance of the Francois army in the late stages of the Republic's participation in the Great War. The grenade she'd tossed (her Widow form was quick, but not quick enough to catch up to a military vehicle) had killed or incapacitated the rest of the car's passengers (she could still hear two heartbeats, though none of them were very strong), but De Lugo appeared to have made it through the crash relatively unscathed.

The disgraced Vice-Minister froze as he saw her emerge from the shadows, black carapace lit only by the stars and the flickering fire lit by the explosion. To his credit, he appeared completely unafraid despite being faced with a horror straight out of nightmare (Karla was self-aware enough to know what her transformed shape looked like, she just didn't care).

"Surrender, De Lugo," she called out, knowing her voice alone would have undone the courage of most men. "Your weapon is no more, and your golden scarecrows have been broken. The Ildoan Army will be crushed soon enough. There is no point in running. Unlike you, we respect the laws of war : you will not have to fear for your life if you lay down your arms, at least not until your trial is over."

He laughed in response, the sound wild and crazed but full of undeniable conviction.

"Do you really think your infernal masters have won, monster ?! This is not over ! God's will cannot be denied so easily !"

"Your 'god' is a fraud," Karla hissed back. "And you and your associates are fools to believe its lies."

She had no doubt De Lugo was favored by some kind of entity : the Eikons and the Saint hadn't come out of nowhere. She just didn't think De Lugo's patron was anything someone sane would ever choose to serve out of their own free will.

Then again, it was doubtful De Lugo had any of that left. After all, he would have been among those who had been exposed to the Eikons' indoctrination effect the longest.

"Say what you want ! The Congregation of Michael does His will. And though your vile mistress has struck down His Saint and slaughtered the noble crusaders with your foul sorceries, their martyrdom won't be in vain ! He will not allow it. All you have achieved this day is slap away the hand with which He reached out to welcome the Empire back into His embrace. Now, all that remains is for holy fire to cleanse this wretched land !"

"Then you won't surrender. I would say it is a pity, but I would be lying. Very well."

De Lugo drew his sword. Despite the blade being ceremonial (even in the brutal close-quarter combat of the trenches, swords had long since fallen out of favor against the much more practical shovel), it was clear that De Lugo knew how to use it from his posture.

Furthermore, whatever it had once been, that sword was no mere Ildoan steel. She'd no doubt it was capable of harming her, even of killing her if she was careless. But she didn't intend to be. While her orders had been to bring her targets back alive in order to investigate the full extent of the Holy See's involvement in this so-called crusade, the Major had made it clear that was very much a secondary objective compared to preventing their escape.

Besides, De Lugo and his 'Congregation' had burned more than enough bridges with their actions for nobody to make a fuss about his summary execution. There weren't any sections in the laws of war prohibiting the mind control of an entire city, but deliberately endangering civilians was very high on the list of possible war crimes. At most, the Francois President may raise a token protest that he hadn't been able to sign the execution order of the disgraced Vice-Minister himself.

Karla's transformation into a Werwolf had come with a general dampening of her emotions. She could still feel, but the intensity of everything had been diminished, or perhaps 'slowed down' was a better descriptor. It certainly made her better suited to what the researchers working on Projekt W were all but certain the Widow-type had been designed for, since she could lay in wait for hours, even days, without getting bored or annoyed.

And yet, as she prepared to kill the man who had done so much harm to the Fatherland, she couldn't deny the cold joy she felt.

Chapter End Notes

AN : For those of you without the patience to check Google Translate, 'Operation Bildersturm' translates to 'Operation Iconoclasm'. Yes, I know, Tanya isn't exactly being subtle there.

The entire scene of Tanya facing the Saint was inspired by the song Vera's Cry by Cami-Cat, available on Youtube. As for the Saint's identity ... well. I had several candidates in mind, but eventually I realized how much more on-brand it would be for the Saint to be nameless. After all, is this not the fate Being X wanted for Tanya in canon ?

The Hünen are based on the Engels from CthulhuTech, specifically the Seraph type. It's probably obvious, but just to be sure : the Hünen are not as powerful as the Seraph-type Engels from CthulhuTech. The Reich's technology isn't anywhere near the level of the New Earth Government, and while magic works in completely different ways in YS and CthulhuTech, that isn't enough to make up the difference. That being said, the Hünen are still giant biological mechs armed with energy cannons, tentacles with the strength to crush a tank like cardboard, and a magic shield thanks to the two aerial mages assigned to support each one.

Also, if you have ever been on train ride and thought it was stressful because of a crying child, try to imagine what the blood pressure of the crew tasked with transporting the Hünen across the country looked like. The occultists had to spend the entire trip keeping the monsters quiet.

The Hüne pilot shown in this chapter, Frieda Wotjek, is based on a member of Tanya's regiment who exists only in the manga (where she is mostly referred to as 'the newbie' due to having joined the group at the same time as Grantz). After asking, I don't think she has a canon name, so I made one up.

Colonel Virginio Calandro is also a canon character (but a named one), who shows up in the latter volumes of the Light Novel. He wasn't part of the initial batch of officers who were called to the Holy See, hence why he has brief moments of lucidity in his POV before the indoctrination reasserts itself. And yes, I went with "indoctrination" as the term for the Eikons' mind control, which is a reference to the Reapers from Mass Effect. The "Tempering" from FFXIV's Primals would have also worked, but the word didn't sound like something the rational Empire would use.

Funny story : I remembered that the Ildoan mage corps existed and hadn't had time to be converted into Eikons when this chapter was almost finished, which is going to make the next chapter of this story just a tad more interesting. And by that, I mean that what was initially planned to be just one chapter to wrap things up before moving on to the next arc is probably going to end up longer.

I've already decided what the price of Tanya using Kosmosblut again will be, but if you have suggestions for the side-effects of a second dose of Endlose Nacht for Visha and the other Untoten who survived the Battle of the Rhine, feel free to share them. Also, I have only just realized that Kosmosblut : KB : K-Bröt. Truly, some things are multiversal constants.

Due to the new chapter of Fate Grand Order being released and my making ill-considered bargains with the Gacha Gods (hallowed be Their name), I am going to focus on A Blade Recast for the foreseeable future (either until I finish the current arc, which should be four chapters if things go as planned, or the end of August, whichever comes first). This will involve brute-forcing my way past the writer's block I have had on that fic since January, so ... wish me luck.

Regardless of how that goes, I still have the goal to finish this story before the end of the year. This would make it the record-holder for "most rapidly completed story I have ever written".

That's all for now. Oh, and you can expect one more update of Ciaphas Cain : Warmaster of Chaos very soon : I want to finish the current chapter before I focus on A Blade Recast.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts and comments on this chapter.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*BOVARIASTADT LIBERATED AS WUNDERWAFFEN CLASH !*

*As all of our readers are doubtless aware, two weeks ago, the Kingdom of Ildoa launched a shocking and unprovoked attack upon the Reich. This attack managed to defeat the Imperial Southern Army through the use of what is widely believed to be their own Wunderwaffen-equivalents, derived from the secret research program run in the Republic by the disgraced General De Lugo. Although details on what happened during this terribly swift advance are still unclear, it is known that one of the magical superweapons they employed resulted in a great deal of damage to the Alps, modifying the shape of the mountains themselves so that the Ildoan troops could advance straight into the territory of the Reich and seize much of Bovaria, including the regional capital.*

*Ever since then, the people of our great nation have watched in shock, while the Imperial Army rose up to meet the challenge that such an intrusion upon the Heimat represented. And just as the General Staff's speakers had promised, this assault upon the Empire's sovereignty did not go unpunished. For yesterday, in a grand coordinated assault codenamed Operation Bildersturm, the Imperial Army inflicted a devastating defeat upon the Ildoan forces stationed around Bovariastadt, crushing them and liberating the city in one fell swoop. This glorious victory was once again accomplished through the tactical deployment of the Wunderwaffen, which once more proved superior to their foreign equivalent.*

*Reinforcements from the Northern and Western Armies are currently in the process of stabilizing the region and dealing with the captured Ildoan soldiers, which are counted in the thousands. Communications with Bovariastadt, which were shut down during the Ildoan occupation, have re-opened, with countless civilians rushing to contact their friends and loved ones who were caught in the Kingdom's sudden attack. However, going there in person to check on them is impossible at the moment.*

*While the details are still unclear, and likely to remain classified for the foreseeable future, it is clear that what happened was no ordinary occupation : while the citizens of Bovariastadt we talked to were extremely distressed and unable to speak of what happened clearly, what they did manage to tell us was disturbing in the extreme, involving the use of a magical form of mind control on the locals in order to ensure their compliance and even turn them against the Empire. Fortunately, the effects of this spell were short-lived, as the Imperial mages were able to break it during the Operation.*

*Furthermore, the Ildoan superweapon responsible for the Alpine destruction appears to have been placed within the city itself, regardless of the danger this posed to the population, leading to supersoldiers battling in the skies above Bovariastadt at the climax of Operation Bildersturm, in a repetition of what happened in Arene except on a greater scale. Such was the scale of the magical energies involved in this battle that its fallout is still visible in the city itself, with the skies having taken strange hues in reaction to the mana thrown around by the*

*battling supersoldiers. The effect this might have on the population are unknown, and numerous magical experts have been sent to investigate.*

*In response to this, a quarantine of Bovariastadt has been declared under the highest authority of the Imperial Army. All citizens need to be examined to make sure that the mind-altering spell has truly been broken, and not simply suppressed. Other announcements include the wanted criminal De Lugo, who was among the Ildoan command staff and perished during the battle. The Francois President acknowledged the death of the disgraced Vice-Minister early this morning, thanking the Empire for removing such a threat to the stability of Europa while also expressing his regret that the Republic wouldn't get the chance to put him on trial.*

*As this correspondent learns more, you can rest assured that this journal will reveal all that is permitted for us to do so …*

Excerpt from the front page of the Berun Post, January 4th, 1926.

---

*January 5th, 1926 – Bovariastadt*

Colonel Lergen looked through the bulletproof window of his military car as it rolled through the streets of Bovariastadt. Despite having been under enemy occupation and served as the site of one of the most brutal Mythos engagements of the War yet (and oh, but adding that qualifier made him want to scream), the city was peaceful. Its initial capture by the Ildoan forces had been quick, and its liberation even quicker.

But while there had been little material damage, the psychological toll the people had suffered was unprecedented. The Major's predictions about mind control had turned out to be true, though mercifully the worst-case scenario of there being no cure had been avoided.

(The thought of what they might have had to do had that not been the case made him want to scream a lot more than he currently did.)

Then, of course, there was the sky. When he had first received the report, he had dared to hope that it was exaggerated, or that things would return to normal in time. The former had been a fool's hope, and if the latter was happening at all, it was too slow for him to notice.

Since Degurechaff had destroyed the Ildoan superweapon, the sky above Bovariastadt had been broken – there just wasn't any other word for it. At the edges of the phenomenon, the heavens looked like a panel of glass a giant had taken a hammer to. Small pieces of blue sky floated near the edge, marking a border between what was normal and what wasn't. Beyond that border laid the same sky that, according to those who had witnessed both, had briefly shone above Arene when the Major had used Kosmosblut for the first time. Stars shone down in an ink-black sky, forming foreign constellations, and an eldritch moon presided over all, far larger than the one Lergen was accustomed to.

He tore his gaze away from the sight as his vehicle slowed down. The crowd around the cathedral was even thicker than the one around Arene's had been, but the military police kept a path clear for military business. Lergen came out of the car, and forced himself not to react

to the whispered praises of the crowd as they saw his uniform. Imperial citizens had always been of a more militaristic bend than was common in most Europan nations, but the folks of Bovariastadt had been quite literally liberated from slavery by the Imperial Army, which had completely wiped out the Army's failure to keep them safe in the first place from their minds. Much like, Lergen supposed, one would not blame a doctor who'd saved you from a deadly disease from not noticing the earlier symptoms of the affliction.

A young woman with the emblem of Division Y's Werwölfe on her uniform greeted him at the entrance of the building. She introduced herself as Corporal Karla Vogt before leading him inside the Cathedral, which had been converted into a field hospital to help deal with the flow of wounded soldiers and civilians that had filled up all of the city's existing medical facilities. Military doctors, both Imperial and Ildoan, moved amidst the rows of patients with purpose, while civilians conscripted to serve as nurses provided what assistance they could.

The wounded soldiers were all Ildoans as far as Lergen could see, which wasn't surprising. The troops of Division Y had their own means of dealing with injury, and letting them mix with the very troops they had slaughtered during Operation Bildersturm was just asking for trouble.

The sight reminded him of the reports he'd received of the current situation of the Ildoan Army. In the wake of Operation Bildersturm, thousands of Ildoan soldiers stationed around Bovariastadt had been captured or had surrendered, but far more had fled. The forces of Division Y simply hadn't been numerous enough to stop them. Most were retreating south, back the way they had come, but not all – and there also was the rest of the Ildoan Army to consider. While the bulk of the invaders had accompanied their superweapon, small contingents had been scattered across Bovaria. With their command and supply chains annihilated, it was only a matter of time before they turned to banditry in order to feed themselves.

All of that, however, would be a concern for later, and hopefully the Imperial reinforcements coming from the rest of the Reich would get there in time to avoid the worst. With a growing sense of déjà vu, the Colonel let the corporal lead him to a small room, guarded by a pair of Division Y troopers who saluted sharply at his approach. Somewhat to his surprise, Vogt followed him inside.

"We have got to stop meeting like this, Major," he said. Laying on her bed, with her back kept up by a pile of cushions, the Director of Division Y smiled in grim amusement at his feeble jest.

"Colonel Lergen," she greeted him. It was something of a relief that her voice was still the same – far colder and calmer than any child's should be, but still distinctly human. Especially when one took into account the rest of her.

The side-effects of the Kosmosblut had been severe. Degurechaff's transformation had spread from her right forearm to the entire right side of her body, stopping at a cracked line that ran down from the top of her skull. She had discarded her bandages for this meeting, and the child-sized hospital gown she wore couldn't conceal the starlight seeping from half of her transmuted flesh.

"Where is your adjutant ?" Lergen asked. The last time the Major had been incapacitated, he'd gotten the feeling you would have needed a crowbar to pry the Untote from her side (metaphorically speaking, of course, as it would take something much stronger than a crowbar to move one of Projekt U against their will). "She is well, I hope ?"

"She's sleeping," replied Degurechaff. "We figured out the side-effect of a second dose of Endlose Nacht quickly this time : from dawn to dusk, the Untoten who have taken the serum twice are completely comatose. In Visha's – sorry, in Lieutenant Serebryakov's case, the effects are slightly attenuated due to her having drunk my own blood at the same time, but she is still far too groggy to function."

"I see." Well, time to address the elephant in the room. Or, to be more precise, the other small blond child in the room, who was currently laying on the bed between the Major and the wall, clutching her right, transmuted arm as she slept. "And who is that ?"

"The ex-wielder of the Ildoan Mythos weapon that burned through the Alps, whom they called the Saint. As far as we've been able to ascertain, she was meant as their counter to me. Were it not for certain unique circumstances, their plan to use her to kill me might very well have succeeded. As it was, I managed to destroy the computation orb she was using – or perhaps I should say, which was using her. The resulting detonation freed her from indoctrination along with the rest of the city, though it had some … secondary effects, which you no doubt witnessed on your way here."

Despite Degurechaff's words, she didn't seem to have any issue with the girl being so close to her.

"I could hardly have missed that if I tried. What's her name ?" asked Lergen.

"We don't know," answered Degurechaff. "She doesn't remember it. That's the issue : she doesn't remember *anything*. Everything she was before being turned into a living weapon is just gone. We've even had to start teaching her language from scratch, as one would with an infant. In the meantime, we are using the name of 'Counterfeit Saint' in our reports, but she'll need a proper name at some point."

"She looks … attached to you," he remarked. The two of them almost looked like sisters. Looking at them now, he had to remind himself that one of them had proven capable of laying waste to entire mountains, and the other was Tanya Degurechaff.

"We tried to pry her away so Iosefka could have a look at her," sighed the Director of Division Y. "But she just started screaming, so we gave up on it. It was … an experience. One we won't repeat for now. I am going to take her back with me to Castle Schwartzstein : Iosefka thinks that a new environment along with meeting with the Nazzadi children will help her."

It wasn't as if they had other options. The girl had been used as a weapon by the Ildoans to kill thousands of Imperial soldiers and tear a path through the Alps : they couldn't exactly put her in an orphanage, or have her fostered by common folks. For her own safety, and that of everyone else, entrusting her to Division Y was the best (and most humane) solution.

"I cannot believe the Ildoan Kingdom would do such a thing to a child like this," muttered Lergen. He was distantly aware of the hypocrisy of saying this to Degurechaff, but he'd long given up treating her like a normal child.

"Loath as I am to give them any credit, I believe that they didn't exactly have a choice in the matter," said Degurechaff.

"You refer to the mind control effect of the Eikons ? The indoctrination effect ?" Lergen frowned.

"Yes, but there is more to it than that. We believe that the Kingdom of Ildoa has fallen under the sway of what we refer to as a Class Ten entity," Degurechaff began to explain, her words filling Lergen with foreboding. "Our working theory is that the entity first gave the ritual to create Eikons to the Francois Republic, and then used the remaining Eikons to brainwash the Holy See into doing its biding before spreading its influence to the Ildoan Army."

"What is a Class Ten entity, exactly ?" He had a feeling he wouldn't like the answer, but also that it was absolutely vital to the Empire's continued existence.

"During the course of our work, Division Y has encountered many otherworldly entities, either summoned on purpose or by accident during our experiments," said Degurechaff. "We designed a classification system based on the threat level of such entities. Of course, it's far from perfect, and we are always updating it, but it's good enough for government work."

Lergen blinked at the strange turn of phrase, but its meaning was clear enough. Degurechaff continued :

"Class One and Two are basically vermin, little more dangerous than small animals. In Castle Schwartzstein, such entities manifest relatively frequently due to the sheer amount of rituals we perform, regardless of our security measures. They are easily handled by our security teams, though. Class Three and above is where things start to be dangerous, and the curve is an exponential, not a linear one. As an example, the Fiends of the Nameless City were classified as Class Three or Class Four, depending on the subtype. The entities with which our volunteers are joined in Projekt W are similarly between Class Four and Five. The Untoten's level vary depending on how much blood they have in reserve, but they are considered Class Five, and can push to Class Six under the effects of Endlose Nacht. The entities used as the core of Projekt H are near the apex of Class Five, bordering on Class Six once they are fitted with the armored suit."

"What about the Heresiarch ?" asked Lergen. "Where would someone like that fit into this system ?"

Degurechaff smiled briefly, and Lergen suddenly felt like a student who had just pleased his teacher with an insightful question.

"It's complicated, given that he was something of a mage himself rather than an entity in his own right, but based purely on his threat level, given that he fought off the Werwölfe's best efforts to kill him and it took Weiss boosted to his absolute limits to take him down in the end, he would probably be in the upper tier of Class Six."

The more Lergen learned about this system, the less he liked where this was going.

"Above that level is where we get the really dangerous beings, ones capable of killing entire conventional armies on their own. The instances of Projekt K are each considered to be at Class Seven, and the Heresiarch could also be considered one depending on the creation process of the Fiends. The false-dragon I fought on the Nazzadi homeworld was Class Eight, which has some interesting implications regarding what exactly happened on that world given the techno-arcane level of advancement their civilization seemed to possess. Before her liberation from indoctrination, the Counterfeit Saint was also at that level, and under the effects of Kosmosblut, I can effectively be considered a Class Eight entity as well, although the time limit and side-effects make that debatable."

The casual reminder that the frail-looking girl laying down before him had the potential to be an order of magnitude more dangerous than the horrors that had broken the Dacian Army so thoroughly, most of the survivors hadn't recovered from the experience yet and likely never would, chilled Lergen to the core. The source of his discomfort wasn't so much Degurechaff herself than the fact that such things were possible at all.

"Thankfully, the next levels remain mostly theoretical. Some of the rituals generated by the Denkmaschine could theoretically allow the summoning of a Class Nine entity, but I have forbidden anything but the most academic of study of these texts, because a Class Nine would pose a threat to the entire world, and I refuse to gamble on our ability to contain and control something like that. I also haven't informed Headquarters of that possibility except in the vaguest of terms, and I would appreciate if you could keep it to yourself as well, Colonel Lergen."

"I can see the wisdom in that," Lergen nodded in fervent agreement. There were some temptations it was just better for the Reich's leadership to never be aware of in the first place.

"I am glad my trust in your intelligence wasn't misplaced," she said with a slight smile. "As for the Class Ten, an entity of that level would be powerful enough to affect our world without needing someone to call it first on our side of the veil through a Mythos ritual. Such contact would be limited, but enough to secure a 'contractor' to assist its future efforts, although 'cultist' is probably more appropriate. We believe that it was one such entity, which we have codenamed 'Being X', which gave Beauvais the ritual to create Eikons."

"'Being X'," repeated Lergen. "Using Remulan numerals, I see. So … are you saying that our enemies received their Mythos knowledge directly from a god, Major ?"

On the one hand, it would explain how the Francois Republic had been able to catch up in the supernatural arms race so quickly, despite starting several years after Division Y and without a Degurechaff of their own to whip the crackpots and occultists of their nation into shape.

On the other hand, it was existentially terrifying beyond any tactical or strategic considerations.

"It is *not* a god," the young girl spat, with more bile than Lergen had ever heard from her. "It masquerades as the One True God, the Creator and Lord of All to those it deceives and enslaves, but it still needs to resort to mind-controlling people into fanatics to get them to do

its bidding. The very existence of the indoctrination effect, and the fact that it can be broken and those freed from it remember their time under it with horror and revulsion, are clear evidence that it isn't omnipotent, and certainly not omni-benevolent either."

Degurechaff took a deep breath, and visibly recomposed herself. This seemed to be a sore point for her, but given that she'd grown up in an orphanage run by the Church, it made sense that the thought of some eldritch monstrosity masquerading as God would infuriate her. Even Lergen, now that he thought about it, was angered by the blasphemy.

"I'm afraid we are to blame for the interest this Class Ten entity has displayed in our reality," she continued as if her outburst hadn't happened. "Division Y's research must have drawn its attention through our meddling with the Mythos realms. I can only offer my deepest apologies that the security measures I set up weren't enough."

"… I don't think there is anything in the regulations against damaging diplomatic relations with a demiurge, Major. Has Being X done anything else against the Reich ?"

She nodded. "Yes. During Operation Bildersturm, one of the Nazzadi mages, Zerayah, was the one who located the Ildoan superweapon and sent the signal for me to move in. Back then, she also encountered a magical scientist who she identified as the one responsible for the girl's condition. When he fled into the cathedral, she gave chase, and killed him right as I engaged the Counterfeit Saint."

A complicated expression briefly passed on Degurechaff's face.

"It was a … difficult situation for her. Nazzadi culture has a deep taboo against taking another human life. Yet given the timing of it all, I believe that had she not done so at that time, the entire operation might have failed. Nevertheless, she has been suffering from mental trauma since then, and I've sent her back to Castle Schwartzstein so that she can recover among her people."

"Probably for the best," agreed Lergen. The situation of the Nazzadi was incredibly complicated, and he would rather not deal with it at the moment. "Now, what about this magical scientist ?"

"Some of the occultists that have joined us here since have identified him as Doctor Adelheid von Schugel, a famous Imperial researcher," dropped the Major casually. "He was the head of Elenium Arms, whose work on multi-core computation orbs was passed on to Division Y after their final test of a quad-core orb went catastrophically wrong. It was believed that Schugel had perished in the explosion, but it seems that he actually survived. It is possible he deliberately sabotaged the testing in order to fake his death and defect, but he might also have been subverted by Being X only during the test itself. We will never know for sure. Regardless, this shouldn't be made public : his relatives would suffer from the reveal of his actions, and it's not as if he did them willingly."

Lergen shook his head. "This whole thing is a legal nightmare, in addition to everything else. How do we punish someone for their actions while under the effect of mind control ?"

"It might not be entirely proper, but I suggest blaming everything on the dead and treating the common soldiers are regular prisoners of war. Fortunately, while the Ildoan attack inflicted heavy casualties to the Southern Imperial Army, they didn't commit any atrocities against civilians … apart from the brainwashing." She looked like she had bitten into something sour. "Which is definitely a war crime, and if it isn't according to the legal texts, then those should definitely be changed, but again, it's not exactly like we can prosecute Being X."

"Putting an eldritch entity on trial is a bit above our pay grade, yes," agreed Lergen. "What else did you find out about Schugel's actions ?"

"I think he was the one to build the computation orb the Counterfeit Saint was using. It was definitely multi-core – three, unless I miss my guess – and nobody else has figured out that technology yet. The object was definitely one-of-a-kind, and without Schugel, I don't think Ildoa can build a new one in any reasonable time frame.

"This all sounds remarkably like good news to me," said Lergen cautiously. "Which leads me to believe there is something else you are about to tell me."

"Indeed," nodded Degurechaff grimly. "For one thing, the hole in the Alps is still there. I sent some of the Untoten to check, and the missing mass hasn't reappeared with the weapon's destruction. Given our speculation as to how this was achieved in the first place, the influence of Being X on our world wasn't expunged with the destruction of the tri-core orb."

"That in itself would be worrying," she continued, "but it's far from all. Corporal Vogt was the one to kill De Lugo and the rest of the Ildoan high command. However, before he died, De Lugo said some ominous things. He claimed to be part of an organization named the Congregation of Michael, which was, in his own words, 'dedicated to doing God's will'. I don't need to tell you just what we suspect that 'God' of theirs of actually being."

"No, you don't." Lergen quietly cursed under his breath. "It has to be a cult of Being X, right in the Holy See. No, given the Eikons' indoctrination effect, the entire Holy See is likely under their control by now."

Lergen's stomach curdled.

"De Lugo and Beauvais must have made their way there after the defeat of their Eikons on the Rhine," he continued, the pieces coming together in his mind. "Beauvais was an Archbishop : he must have had contacts in the Holy See that could help them flee there. The missing Eikons must have gone with them, in their human shape so as not to draw too much attention. And from there …"

"From there," Degurechaff finished, "they could subvert everyone they needed to start their grim work again. We learned from the former Eikons in the city that most of those who joined this so-called Crusade were recruited from the Southern Continent, lured from the Europan colonies by the promises of priests working for the Holy See."

Lergen blinked. "You have interrogated an Eikon ?"

"They aren't Eikons anymore," replied Degurechaff. "When I confronted Being X atop this building, the backlash of magical energy that broke the population's indoctrination also affected those Eikons who had rushed back to the city after I revealed myself. Not many of them were still alive at that time, but those who were have … changed. Our occultists have called them the Lunarchs due to the alterations to their appearance, but most importantly, they too were freed of Being X's influence in the process."

"I … nevermind. I'm sure the details will be in the reports. So De Lugo and Beauvais founded or subverted this Congregation, and Schugel joined them after deserting from the Empire once he fell under Being X's indoctrination through another way – which, by the way, we'll need to figure out so we can block it in the future. De Lugo and Schugel are dead, but Beauvais is still at large."

"Which leads us to what else De Lugo said that is cause for concern. When Corporal Vogt reminded him of the collapse of the Ildoan Army in an attempt to get him to surrender" – Lergen was almost sure that was a polite way of saying 'taunted the lunatic with the failure of his attempt to invade the Empire', but he let it slide – "De Lugo mentioned something about 'holy fire cleansing this wretched land'."

"A back-up plan," deduced Lergen. "Something to fall back on, should their invasion be stopped and their Saint defeated."

"Precisely. As to the nature of this plan, well, we have some theories. One key point is that we haven't seen any sign of the Kingdom of Ildoa's aerial mages. Their army advanced under the cover of the Eikons, but no normal mages were detected."

Oh. Oh, no. She couldn't possibly mean …

"Thank to the Lunarchs, we know that Beauvais himself is the only one capable of performing the ritual to turn mages into Eikons. Schugel was apparently responsible for doing further adjustments to them post-transformation, which explains why their mana output was greater than the ones in the Rhine despite their comparative lack of experience. We also know that the ritual can only be performed on Sundays, and on what is considered consecrated ground – though given that he is based in the Holy See, that last bit is hardly an obstacle."

Indeed, it would be harder to find somewhere within the Holy See that wasn't blessed in one way or another. The place had served as the headquarters of the Church for centuries, and despite the many, many trials and tribulations it had faced during that period, it remained the focus of one of the most influential religions on the planet.

"The best case scenario is that the Congregation is plotting some sort of scaled-up version of the Eikon transformation ritual, in the same vein as the Rite of Union we use to create Werwölfe more efficiently. Those would then be unleashed en masse on the Empire, not to conquer, but just to burn."

"Several hundreds of new Eikons under the control of brainwashed fanatics hell-bent on destroying the Reich, at a time where we don't have anyone who can use the Kosmosblut, and half of our Untoten force is now fully restricted to nocturnal deployment." Lergen sighed.

"And I know you well enough to realize you aren't exaggerating when you say this is the best case scenario. Go ahead, Major. Give me your real assessment."

"An apocalypse," she said bluntly. "The same sort of phenomenon that happened in the Alps, but across the entire Empire. Every Ildoan mage would need to be used as a vessel, especially without Schugel to adjust them or build another tri-core computation orb, and the backlash would likely wipe Ildoa off the map in the bargain. But that would be little consolation for us, since we would be dead if we are lucky, and trapped in Being X's domain if we aren't."

"And that is the worst case you can think of ?" Lergen asked weakly. It was fortunate he was already sitting, because he didn't think his legs could have supported his weight at the moment.

"Yes. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle, but in any case, we cannot allow this to come to pass."

"No, we cannot." Lergen thought to himself for a moment. "You said the Eikon creation ritual could only take place on a Sunday. Do you think …"

He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud, but Degurechaff understood his meaning.

"I am afraid so. We have to act on the assumption that the Congregation will be ready to enact its back-up plan by the end of the week. Five days to conquer Ildoa might seem ridiculous," she admitted, "but such isn't our objective. The rest of the country is irrelevant : what matters is removing the Congregation's threat."

"Which means seizing the Holy See itself. Which is located right in the middle of Remula, the Ildoan capital, surrounded by millions of civilians who may or may not be under Being X's indoctrination as well," muttered Lergen, before sending the young girl a sharp look. "You aren't in any state of taking part in that, Major. I hope you weren't going to suggest otherwise."

"No, I wasn't," she said. "I considered it at first, but I was … dissuaded from that course of action," she finished, glancing at the sleeping child hugging her right arm.

Good, at least he didn't have to convince her otherwise. Of course, it also meant that someone else would have to do it. Someone with enough authority to enter the territory of a foreign nation, and with enough experience of the Mythos to deal with the unexpected. Someone whose name, in all likelihood, would go down into History for all the wrong reasons.

Lergen really, really didn't want to follow his train of thought to its natural conclusion. But it was his duty to do so, both as a soldier of the Empire and, the more he thought about it, as a human being with free will and dignity.

"Very well," he said, his voice sounding far calmer than he had expected it to. Perhaps acceptance was the key to dealing with the insanity that his life had become since the day his path had crossed Degurechaff's, what felt like so long ago. "I will see to it myself. Right now, I need the services of one of your mages to contact Staff Headquarters. This is something best discussed face-to-face, and there is no time for me to get back to Berun. What assets does

Division Y have to spare for a lightning strike through Ildoan territory toward the Holy See ?"

"All nine instances of Projekt H were damaged during the battle, and we didn't have time to make spare parts for their equipment, but by stripping down the most damaged ones our engineers have been able to get four of them ready. The remaining five are being stored in some of requisitioned warehouses under heavy guard," the Major added quickly when she saw his rising concern.

"I see. Their help would certainly be appreciated, but what about the pilots ?"

Degurechaff's proposal to get the monstrosities under control to provide heavy support for Operation Bildersturm had made it clear that the mages who linked with the entities would be doing so at tremendous risk. This was already going to be difficult enough without having to worry about a bunch of mentally unstable loose canons with biomechanical titans under their command.

"They are still being run through some tests, but so far there doesn't seem to have been any long-term side-effects to their communion with the Projekt, unlike what we feared. Of course, there might still be some we cannot detect, and repeated communions are all but guaranteed to affect them in some way, if only because the human psyche isn't meant to wield such power, let alone join with alien entities. But they should be able to pilot the Hünen to accompany you southward. And while it won't exactly help our image worldwide, they should be able to keep up with the rest of your force as long as we give up on hiding their existence."

Lergen couldn't help but wince at the mental image. He was going to lead horned giants through an enemy country, in order to attack the heart of one of the world's most influential religions. The Allied Kingdom's propaganda department was going to have a field day with this, unless they managed to get the word about the Congregation's brainwashing out first, and that was going to be a challenge, given how impossible the entire thing sounded even to his own ears.

"Apart from that," the Major continued, "the Werwölfe are ready to keep fighting. We took some casualties in the battle, but all the survivors have already recovered, and they understand the threat perfectly. Captain Weiss is also ready to accompany you, and we can spare enough occultists to perform the Ritual of Correspondence. Oh, and I think Sergeant Barchet and his squad arrived in town earlier this morning, too. They will be ready to resume their bodyguard duties."

"Good, that should be enough Mythos firepower." And if it wasn't, well, he would just have to deal with it – that was why he wore the rank insignia, after all. "This will need some conventional forces too. As long as I have the support of Generals Zettour and Rudersdorf, pulling together some units from the Western and Northern Armies shouldn't be too difficult …"

The two of them spent some more time discussing various possibilities, before Corporal Vogt returned with a Division Y mage capable of performing the long-range communication Mythos spell to contact their colleague back in Berun. Less than two hours later, Lergen had

the full support of Staff Headquarters to requisition any and all units he believed were needed for this operation, vital to the safety of the Fatherland.

After bidding the Major goodbye, Colonel Lergen left the Cathedral with an urgency in his step he hadn't felt since the near-disaster on the Southern Continent. He really hoped this wasn't going to become a habit.

---

*"From outside the city, the phenomenon is almost impossible to perceive, apart from a slight blur that can easily be attributed to heat or something else equally mundane. It is only when one approaches the city on foot that the large scar becomes visible. Aerial mages have tried to get close to the hole in the cosmos, but if it is real and not some kind of perpetual illusion, it is too high up for even someone with a D-24 dual-core computation orb to reach.*

*The stars visible through this window match no constellation we've been able to identify in our star charts at the moment. Following the Director's suggestion, we are now exploring the possibility that the window shows a night sky from another point within our own galaxy. To that end, we are attempting to analyze the radiance of individual stars in order to match the results against those which can be observed from elsewhere on our world. Of course, given the sheer number of stars, this work promises to take years at the very least, even with the use of computation orbs to hasten the most complex calculations. Since the phenomenon appears stable, however, it is likely we'll have all the time needed.*

*The alien sky visible through the tear has remained static since our observations began : both stars and moon haven't moved, although the radiance of the latter shifts in accordance with the day/night cycle of the surrounding area. Concerns have been raised as to the health impact of the citizens' possible deficiency of vitamin D due to lack of exposure to sunlight, but as of this report, no such ill effects have been observed.*

*A more interesting issue is the fact that a handful of citizens have started to show physical alterations. Some who were injured during the battle against the Eikons (prior to their own liberation and transformation, see report L-34835-A for further details on the Lunarchs) have healed normally, but the skin on their wounds shows the same coloration as the Director's following the use of Kosmosblut. These individuals have also reported dreaming of the eldritch sky, with those dreams being accompanied by deep feelings of understanding of contentment that linger for several moments upon waking. Of course, many other citizens have experienced similar dreams, doubtless linked to their subconscious minds associating the phenomenon's appearance with their liberation from indoctrination. Whether these dreams are something else in the case of the star-marked individuals remains unclear at this moment.*

*The total number of these cases remains very low, barely thirty in the entire city. Thanks to the Imperial practice of checking every citizen for magical potential, we discovered that in every such case, the star-marked subjects possessed some degree of mana, albeit far below the threshold required for recruitment into the aerial mage corps. This might explain the last observed symptom, which is the ability to perform small-scale telekinesis, albeit restricted to drawing objects toward oneself, with the heaviest recorded being a book weighing half a kilogram moved from a bookshelf across the room to the subject's hand.*

*At the moment, the star-marked have been allowed to continue to live their lives freely within Bovariastadt, subject to the same regulations as the rest of the population while the quarantine is in effect ..."*

Excerpt from the preliminary report of Division Y's occultists regarding the phenomenon above the city of Bovariastadt following Operation Bildersturm, added to the records on February 14th, 1926.

---

*"We who were blinded by golden fire now walk under gentle silver radiance, our shackles broken by a blade of moonlight. Yet having already been burned, we naturally cannot help but wonder. Is our new faith false too ? Were we freed from the Eikons' control, only to fall under that of the Lady of Stars ?*

*The answer is obvious, once we look past the very understandable fear that our sacred free will is being impugned upon yet again. The very fact that we are able to feel that fear, to ask ourselves those questions, is proof that we remain free.*

*It is revelation, not manipulation, that has caused the changes we now perceive within ourselves. Having gazed into the infinite, having experienced the shackling of our minds, how could we remain the same as we were before ?*

*The Lady of Stars asks for no prayer, nor does she demands we supplicate ourselves before her. She only wishes for us to be free, for only then can we become the best version of ourselves – only then can we stand together. Forced unity is no unity at all : it is through willing choice that it is granted strength ..."*

Excerpt from the writings of Cavan Ehrlich, distributed among the newly-founded Bovariastadt branch of the Path of Stars, January 1926.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Funny story : in the first draft, this chapter was just the clean-up of the failed Crusade and the set-up of the next arc. But then, while writing the last chapter, I asked myself "Wait a minute, where are all the Ildoan aerial mages ?" and blam, the seed was planted. Now Lergen has to lead Division Y to raid the Holy See and prevent the Congregation from doing whatever it is they are planning on doing. Oh boy, the next chapter is going to be interesting, in all the best ways for us and the worst ways for our dear Colonel.

Yes, Remula is the name of the Ildoan capital in this story. And yes, this means that two thousand years ago, the Remulan Empire stretched across much of Europa. I am sure you can all figure out what happened that resulted in this name's change.

Speaking of names, does anybody have a suggestion for what to formally call the phenomenon above Bovariastadt ? Something in Imperial/German that sounds

appropriately sinister/eldritch would be nice, but I haven't been able to find anything that clicked. Also, if you've suggestions for the Counterfeit Saint's new name once she recovers enough to need one, don't hesitate. I'm thinking of giving her a Nazzadi name, for maximum irony, but perhaps you've a better idea.

If you want a better idea of what the tear in the sky looks like, check out the cinematic trailer for WoW's "Shadowlands" expansion. The ending of the cinematic should give you a good idea of how it looks like (although somewhat larger due to covering an entire city, and obviously what's visible through the hole is different).

For the side-effects of Kosmosblut, check out the post threadmarked "Sketchs for Kosmosblut side effects, by Zach Zachary" on the SB thread. ANd yes, the spread of the transformation is very worrying indeed. How many times do you think Tanya can use it before there is nothing left ? And what happens next ?

I mean, *I* know the answer, of course. But I'm curious what you think.

Oh, and the Path of Stars is spreading. Nothing to see there, I'm sure. Same with the star-marked. Everything is under control, move along, citizen.

Now that this chapter is done, iff you want to incite the Muse to make me write the next one whether I want to or not, you can offer up Omakes and fanart - we no longer accept the blood of goats, following a cease-and-desist sent by He-Who-Dwells-Below on behalf of the Opposition, and the horned bastard has a lot of lawyers on his payroll for some unfathomable reason.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : Colonel Eric von Lergen

Subject : Operation Kirchenbrecher

Date : January 5th, 1926

*Colonel,*

*As per our previous exchange, you are authorized to requisition any and all material and personnel required for your foray into Ildoan territory, and ordered to depart immediately.*

*Rudersdorf and I will deal with the questions and worries of the civilian ministries and the rest of the Imperial government that this incursion into foreign land will undoubtedly raise. If need be, we will go directly to the Kaiser to explain our reasoning. Do not worry : I will take full responsibility for anything you might need to do in order to safeguard the Fatherland's future.*

*Focus on removing the threat of the Congregation before it is too late. Ignore any and all future orders commanding you to turn back, even if they should appear to come from myself or Rudersdorf : given the enemy's indoctrination abilities and the fact they were able to subvert Doctor Schugel in the middle of an Imperial Army research facility, there is no telling whether or not we are safe from such attempts ourselves.*

*Although it feels strange to write this given your mission, may God be with you, Colonel. I hope we'll meet again in Berun when this is over.*

---

*"Lergen's March remains to this day an exemplar of fast advance through enemy territory. Following the liberation of Bovariastadt, the then-Colonel led a small, elite force (which went down into popular history as Lergen's Column) directly south, toward the heart of the madness that had grown within the Kingdom of Ildoa like a vile tumor.*

*The March has been compared to Hannibal's own, mostly due to the crossing of the Alps, but Colonel Lergen's invasion of the Ildoan peninsula proved much swifter than that of the ancient general. By using the very opening through the mountains the Ildoan Army had created with their superweapon, the Column was able to enter Ildoa within a day of its departure from Bovariastadt.*

*Of the Ildoan Army, only the Air Force remained a possible threat to Lergen's Column, as it had seen little action during the Hollow Crusade. At the order of Brigadier General Zettour,*

*the Imperial Air Force deployed as many planes as it could to cover the advance, flying to the very limit of their operational zones from the various air bases located near the border.*

*This precaution proved mostly unneeded, for with the decapitation of their chain of command the remnants of the Ildoan armed forces floundered, lacking any clear direction. Still, there were a handful of aerial engagements between the two Air Forces, during which the Imperial pilots showed how well they'd learned the lessons paid for in blood on the Western and Northern fronts of the Great War.*

*Lergen's Column advanced day and night, pausing only to refuel their vehicles from the stores of oil carried in a handful of trucks. Along the roads, the Hünen marched, matching the speed of the motorized vehicles with their tireless, half-mechanical limbs. Nobody knew what the strain of such prolonged union with their mounts would do to the pilots of Projekt H, but it was judged a necessary risk.*

*Thanks to the column's incredible speed, the March soon overcame the remnants of the Ildoan Army that had gone South after the liberation of Bovariastadt. Left shocked and confused by their indoctrination's lifting, these soldiers were rightly terrified of the sight of the Hünen who had torn through their lines, and either scattered before them or threw down their weapons and surrendered. Of course, the column didn't have either the time or the means to capture them, and instead sped along, much to the soldiers' surprise (as many of them later recorded in their memoirs).*

*And so, with only moments to spare before the dawn on the final day, Lergen's Column reached its destination ..."*

Extract from *Lergen : The Man, the Myth, the Legend*, written by professor Helena Schmidt, published by Berun University Presses, 1954.

---

*"Our brethren in the North have failed. The Crusade had been halted, the Holy Knights butchered by the Imperial beasts, the Saint defeated by the Witch, and the Holy Relic destroyed. Without it to guide them, the soldiers of Ildoa have broken, for Man is weak and requires the hand of God to guide him unto the righteous path.*

*Now the heretics come with their monsters, to destroy all those who serve Him, that naught may remain to oppose them in their perversion of His will. With all but two of the Holy Knights lost, we cannot hope to bring the whole of Ildoa into His embrace.*

*Yet we cannot despair, for our duty to the Lord remains. Even now, His Holiness makes preparations for his final martyrdom. After spending his life in service to Him, so too shall his death, which along with that of the remaining Knights shall serve as a holy trinity that'll lay down the foundations of our ultimate victory. Upon these foundations shall be added the strength of the sons and daughters of Ildoa, so that together we may call forth the agent of God which shall purify this land.*

*Make no mistake : the sacrifices will be great, beyond even the blessed martyrdom of the Patriarch. It wasn't without good reason that the Congregation reserved this option as a last*

*resort, for God is merciful, even unto those who have turned their back to Him. But the heretics' vile deeds have left us with no other choice.*

*Take comfort in the knowledge that all shall return to Him in time, and be welcomed into His benevolent embrace, free from all pain and struggle."*

Memo circulated within the Congregation of Michael, written by Archbishop Baptiste Beauvais, January 4th, 1926.

---

*January 9th, 1926 – Outskirts of Remula, Ildoan Capital*

They had made it.

According to Lergen's watch and the almanac one of Division Y's occultists had pulled from who knew where, they had less than an hour left before sunrise. Based on the testimony of the Lunarchs, the sun needed to be visible over the horizon for the Eikon creation ritual to take place. They were hoping the same limitation applied to whatever the Congregation had planned, although they weren't going to take any risk.

The small handful of Ildoan soldiers who had tried to block their entrance had already been disposed of. He would have given the order to take prisoners, but there was no time, and it was rather clear than they had all been indoctrinated anyway. Nothing else explained the fact that they had stood their ground when confronted with Projekt H.

The Hünen were going to have to stay behind. Bringing them into the city would guarantee disaster : they couldn't move through the streets without leaving a trail of destruction that would drive the population to panic, which could slow their advance to a crawl unless they resorted to slaughtering everyone in their way – and Lergen wasn't ready to give that order. He fervently hoped that he never would be.

Ildoan newspapers they'd obtained on their way hadn't contained any word of the crushing defeat of the Army in the north, but word of mouth had inevitably spread. Tens of thousands of Ildoan soldiers had fled south after the battle of Bovariastadt, once their indoctrination had been broken by the Counterfeit Saint's defeat and the tri-core computation orb's destruction.

The Basilica of All Saints was their intended target. According to the Lunarchs, Beauvais had performed the ritual to create Eikons in different buildings across the Holy See, but there was no doubt the Congregation would use the holiest possible location for their work today. And if they didn't, well, the Basilica would still serve as a beachhead into the rest of the Holy See.

He took a deep breath. This was it. He couldn't stop now, of course (it had been too late the moment they had set off from Bovariastadt), but what happened next would either cement his position in the History books … or there would be no History to be recorded at all. Which was a sobering thought, and more than enough to put his doubts to rest. When faced with the prospect of utter annihilation, a lot of things previously unthinkable became all too easy.

"All units," he called out over the radio. "Advance."

---

*January 9th, 1926 – Remula, Ildoan Capital*

Once, in another life, Grantz had hoped to visit the Holy See one day. Never, not even in his darkest nightmares, had he thought it would happen like this.

The thought of having to fight his way through throngs of mind-controlled civilians had haunted Grantz on the way here, but to his immense relief (and that of everyone in the task force), the population of Remula hadn't been indoctrinated as that of Bovariastadt had been. The Congregation must have kept its Eikons hidden within the Holy See, revealing them only when the Crusade had been declared, without enough time to subject the millions of inhabitants to their brainwashing effect.

Things would be different in the Holy See itself, though, of that Grantz had no doubt.

Unopposed, and with the civilians running screaming out of their way, the Werwölfe had reached the entrance to the Square of All Saints, whose flagstones had been trodden by the feet of uncounted pilgrims and tourists over the centuries. On the other side, the Basilica loomed, as enormous as it was beautiful under the illumination of the first tentative rays of the sun – but Grantz could hardly enjoy its aesthetics at the moment.

He could feel the pressure from this place. This was Being X's influence at work, just like Zerayah had reported feeling when she had fought in Bovariastadt's cathedral. Grantz might have doubted, might have felt this was the holy ground rejecting his corrupted form, except he had entered other churches since his transformation without issue, and if this really was God's work, then he wouldn't be able to fight through it.

He could feel the part of him that hadn't been born on this world recoil from the pressure, like an animal before a greater predator. It was afraid – no. He wouldn't hide behind such semantics. *He* was afraid. And so were the other Werwölfe around him : already their advance was faltering, and they hadn't even faced any real resistance yet.

Unbidden, the thought of all that he fought for rose in Grantz's mind. He thought of his family, whom he'd promised to meet again once the war was over. He thought of his friends, those who yet lived and those who had died. He thought of the Nazzadi children he had watched play in the courtyard of Castle Schwartzstein, safe and happy for the first time in their lives.

He thought of a young girl's smile that shone like the sun when she looked at him, not seeing the monster he sometimes feared he'd become but the hero she thought him to be.

The Congregation of Michael threatened all this with destruction. The Major had said so, and Grantz believed her.

So what if he was afraid ? So what if they faced the power of an entity that might as well be a god ? He was Imperial. He was Division Y. He was Werewolf. He had killed men and monsters, and ventured to the very edge of death, only to be dragged back by an officer who had been dangerous long before her eyes had started to gleam with cosmic light.

If a god threatened the Fatherland, then he would be the death of gods.

Warren Grantz howled, an inhuman sound that shattered windows and made men and women cry out in fear, and charged into the Square of All Saints – and the rest of Division Y's warriors followed in his wake, drawing strength from the mystical bond that linked the children of Projekt W together. Their feet tore through the flagstones of the Square, leaving footprints that belonged to no natural creature.

At last, the Battle of the Holy See had begun.

The gates of the Basilica opened, and its defenders marched out. These were the Waldstatten Praetorians, who had been oath-bound to the protection of His Holiness for centuries. Grantz remembered the briefing they had received, cramped around the radio in the back of racing truck and listening to Colonel Lergen speaking from his command vehicle. Once, the Praetorians had been a force to be reckoned with, but those days were long gone. Since Ildoa had been unified and the Holy See forced to abandon its claim over Remula and its surroundings, they had become little more than a parade unit, their dwindling numbers tasked only with ceremonial duties.

But now they stood against the Werwölfe without any hint of fear in their gaze. Which, no matter one's courage, should be impossible. Grantz had enough self-awareness to know that very few humans could stand against the warriors of Projekt W at all, let alone without fear. There was only one possible cause for the Waldstatten Praetorians' behavior : they were all indoctrinated.

Not that it mattered. Indoctrinated or not, well-trained or not, there were still only about a hundred of them in sight, armed with halberds and wearing full suits of plate that had no place on a modern battlefield. Against over four scores of Werwölfe of varying types, they didn't stand a chance. The entire Rhine front had been turned with less than a quarter of that number, and though they lacked the support of the Untoten (who had exhausted their stocks of mage blood in the battle of Bovariastadt), it shouldn't make much of a difference against what part of Grantz couldn't help but think of as mere mortals.

Which only made him more uneasy, because only a fool underestimated the enemy, especially when said enemy had proven capable of removing mountains if they stood in its way.

His claws tore through the soldier's armor with ease – and were stopped by the smooth, alabaster skin beneath. He had ripped through the plating of Francois tanks with his claws, yet the Praetorian's naked flesh was proof against them.

Enhanced soldiers, he realized, moments before an armored fist rammed into his side and sent him flying head over heels. The Congregation hadn't limited its experimentation to mages, it seemed. Still, the Werwölfe had been trained by Tanya Degurechaff, and they didn't slow down their charge. Within seconds, the entire line of Praetorians was engaged.

Soon, it became clear that whoever had transformed the Praetorians had been learning as they worked.

And all that time, they fought in perfect, eerie silence. Not a single scream or battle cry, while the Werwölfe howled and shouted, their blood quickened by the frenzy of battle.

Nearby, a Mirage ripped a Praetorian's helmet off, revealing a completely blank head of the same white material, with no trace of eyes, nose or mouth – not the head of a man, but that of a mannequin in a clothing store.

Then there was fire, hot enough to melt the strange not-flesh of the Praetorian Grantz had been battling. A humanoid shape of black ash and blazing fire stood there, having just punched the enemy apart. Grantz recognized him as Markus, currently the only instance of the Efreet-type in Projekt W. Behind him came the hulking shape of Frank, the Nightmare-type Werwolf, bombarding the Praetorians with a stream of scarlet projectiles that didn't quite resemble the mana projectiles Grantz had once fired as an aerial mage.

"Push forward," growled the Efreet as he turned another Praetorian to ash. His voice was as if a forest fire could speak. "We will hold them here."

With a quick pulse of approval, Grantz leapt across the battle line, followed by half of the Werwölfe as they disengaged from the Praetorians.

They rushed through the antechamber, and reached the vast inner chamber of the Basilica. It was occupied by dozens of kneeling men and women, each wearing the uniform of an Ildoan aerial mage. Yet they looked nothing like the aerial mages Grantz had once been part of : they were skeletally thin, all vitality drained from them. Half of them were already dead, but they were still smiling, the same unnerving grin of rapturous ecstasy on the face of every corpse that those still living displayed.

The air was crackling with latent power, drained from the poor wretches that had been the elite of Ildoa's military forces until recently. The weight of the spiritual pressure was also far higher than it'd been outside, to the point every movement other than running outside with all his speed was taking a considerable effort of will.

At the other side of the room was the grand altar, from where the Patriarch of the Holy See himself had led mass and performed benedictions for centuries. A man in priestly robes stood behind that altar, holding an ornate staff high above his head. Grantz recognized that man, and the sight of him filled him with cold fury. Baptiste Beauvais, the archbishop of Parisee. Creator of the Eikons, and puppet of Being X.

Also, one this operation's target, with orders to kill on sight with extreme prejudice.

Grantz and a few other Werwölfe fired at the Archbishop with their ranged abilities, only for them to be stopped by a shimmering sphere of golden light. A magic shield of some kind, Grantz recognized. But those shouldn't work in melee.

Grantz charged, ignoring the immobile Ildoan mages as he trampled over them without eliciting the slightest reaction on their part. He ran, faster than he ever had before, driven by the utter certainty that they had to kill Beauvais right now. The other Werwölfe shared his certitude, and they shrieked as one as they charged, pushing themselves beyond the furthest limits of their Mythos-forged bodies …

… but in the end, it wasn't enough.

"Arise, oh Champion of the Heavens, oh Envoy of God, oh Lord of War," Grantz heard Beauvais say, just as he leapt over the altar, claws at the ready. "Arise, Michael, and smite the unholy !"

There was a flash of golden light –

A sense of something moving-arriving-descending –

A deep, shuddering breath taken through too many mouths –

And then Grantz's inhuman instincts were screaming at him, warning him of danger *danger DANGER* -

---

*January 9th, 1926 – The Holy See, Square of All Saints*

As he walked through the broken barricades of the Holy See and into the Square of All Saints, Colonel Lergen idly asked himself what the hell he was doing here. But he knew the answer : while there would be no need for a Colonel to go so close to the frontline in a conventional engagement, this was anything but. He needed to see what was happening with his own eyes in order to make the best judgment call he could, and if that meant risking his own skin, well, that was part of the oaths he'd sworn.

Suddenly, he felt a shift in the air, and some antediluvian instinct told him that something was very, very wrong. His blood ran cold, and he stopped dead in his tracks, along with all of his escort, who glanced around nervously, holding their weapons tight.

There was a noise like a moan of pain, but impossibly loud. Then, ahead of the group, the Basilica of All Saints cracked like an egg shell, and a vast creature emerged from it in a grotesque parody of birth.

It was …

Monstrous.

Lergen's mind rebelled at the sight, refusing to grasp the full horror of its form lest it shatter to pieces. Instead, he only caught glimpses, fragments of the greater whole. Its skin smooth like marble and white like bone. It had hundreds of eyes, each and every one of which blazed with golden radiance. It had wings, so many wings, and arms, so many arms, and mouths – so many mouths, all of them open and singing.

Though the Imperial Colonel couldn't have explained how, he knew with utter certainty that this thing was incomplete. Unfinished. Prematurely awakened, like a child cut from their mother's womb before their time. Their desperate race across Ildoa hadn't been for nothing, it seemed. Now all that remained was to see whether it would make enough difference to save Europa.

It had to be a Class Eight entity, perhaps even a Class Nine, although Lergen was fervently hoping its incomplete state was a sign that they had been in time to interrupt the ritual and

prevent it from manifesting its full strength.

He could see the shapes of Werwölfe clinging to the monster, looking hilariously small in comparison, trying to hurt it and doing no more harm than ants biting a man's ankles. Others had been scattered by the creature's appearance, and others still simply laid where they had fallen, having succumbed to injuries even their unearthly regeneration couldn't save them from.

The monster roared and slammed down with some of its arms, crushing a handful of Werwölfe and shaking the ground in the process. Such was the strength of the blow that, despite standing over a hundred meters away from the impact, Lergen and his escort lost their footing as the Square's pavement shattered. Shaking off the broken remnants of the Basilica, the horrible beast started to advance through the Square, toward the entrance and the city beyond.

Lergen stood directly in its path, but in that moment, it wasn't fear for himself he felt, but utter terror at the thought of the city behind him being exposed to this eldritch horror -

And then Captain Weiss was here, flying through the skies like a blazing meteor that slammed into the monstrosity, eliciting a many-mouthed roar of rage and what Lergen hoped was pain as it was stopped in its tracks. The aerial mage had been kept in reserve, standing in the center of the Correspondence ritual, ready to take to the air immediately. The occultists must have seen the creature appear (they could hardly have missed it) and sent him without waiting for Lergen's order on the radio. Good, he would've had their hides if they'd waited for instructions in this situation.

The two beings clashed, and the Holy See quaked with the echoing power. Buildings that had stood for centuries crumbled, crushing those left inside to bloody paste and destroying ancient, priceless works of art at the same time. In the distance, Lergen heard the sound of uncountable screams of terror, as the people of Remula bore witness to the monster that had risen from the sacred place at their city's heart.

Weiss was doing his best, but it soon became obvious that it wasn't going to be enough. In the end, no matter how strong the Imperial mage was, he was still just one man, and while the Ritual of Correspondence lent him the strength of twenty more, the monster had been created from the mage corps of an entire nation – or at least Lergen assumed so.

They had to kill it now. Even as it fought against Weiss, Lergen could feel its influence pushing on his sanity, could hear the distant chorus of praising voices demanding that he join them in endless worship. This, he knew, was the indoctrination effect starting to take hold, seeking to turn him into another pawn of Being X. Perhaps his exposure to Degurechaff's gaze was providing him some protection; far more likely, the abomination was too busy fighting to deploy its influence to the fullest, or perhaps the fact they'd been able to interrupt its creation had left it weakened.

Regardless, if it didn't die here and now, there would be nothing to stop it from brainwashing the entire population of Remula. Millions of civilians, enslaved to the will of Being X – and that would be only the start. With Degurechaff stuck recovering from her confrontation with the Counterfeit Saint, all of Ildoa would fall under its influence. The mundane armies of the

Empire would either be annihilated or subjugated, and with the fall of Division Y, the Reich would follow.

The thought of his homeland reduced to a land of thralls, mindlessly praying to a false god, filled Lergen with horror and fury both, and he drew strength from the heady mix of emotions. There had to be a way to avoid this. He wouldn't accept otherwise, would keep looking for it until his dying breath.

He forced himself to stand, ignoring the pain from half a dozen cuts and more bruises than he cared to count. As he did so, Sergeant Barchet and his squad formed up around him, their arcane rifles at the ready.

"Look, sir, over there !" called out one of the troopers.

Lergen followed his gesture. A figure was emerging from the ruins of the Basilica, walking on the broken ground as surely as if he were marching down a red carpet thrown to welcome a visiting monarch. The man was burning from the inside with golden fire, consumed by a power that had no place in this reality.

"Behold the vengeful sword of God !" the burning man was bellowing. "Behold Archangel Michael, come down to deliver us from evil ! Repent, heretics ! Repent, and through the flames be purified of your sins !"

Despite the eldritch flames devouring him, enough of his face remained for Lergen to recognize him.

"Archbishop Beauvais !" Lergen called out, and something in him quivered as the figure's burning gaze fell upon him. But he fought on, and kept talking : "Where is the Patriarch ? What have you done with him ?"

It was a question that had haunted the planning of this operation from the start. Although the temporal influence of the Church's supreme leader had been much diminished in the last half-century, the office still held considerable sway over the believers. That he would've been a priority target for indoctrination had never been in question, but Lergen had hoped to take him alive, so that Degurechaff and her people could break Being X's hold onto him. It wouldn't undo the damage to the Empire's image that attacking the Holy See would cause, but it would've helped mitigate it.

The Archbishop's smile was chillingly gentle, almost beatific, and completely at odd with the fact that he was *burning alive.*

"His Holiness has been blessed beyond measure," he declared, hands raised in worship toward the monstrous Michael-thing. "Through him the Will of God is made manifest ! Through his pious spirit and pure body, the Light of Heaven has descended upon this fallen world !"

… Oh. Well, there went any plan of rescuing the Patriarch from indoctrination to help manage the aftermath of this disaster.

"Sergeant, kill him," he ordered. There was no point in wasting anymore time talking to this lunatic.

Half a dozen beams of coruscating energy converged on the burning priest, only to be blocked by a glowing shield that had suddenly appeared around him. Beauvais' face twisted in contempt, and he gestured with his right hand, unleashing a wave of invisible kinetic energy that sent Lergen and his escort hurling backward, to crash amidst the rubble of the ravaged Square.

Through luck more than skill, Lergen managed to roll with the fall and came to his feet quickly. The corrupted priest's eyes were firmly on him now, and he cast about for anything he could use to save his skin – *there*. One of the troopers had dropped his M-912, and the rifle's casing had broken with the fall (they were notoriously fragile, Lergen recalled), revealing the glowing crystal within.

Moving on instinct, Lergen grabbed the crystal in his thankfully gloved hand and ran straight at Beauvais. The Archbishop remained immobile, stunned by the audacity of the move. His mouth was beginning to open, no doubt for another round of taunting or preaching, as Lergen reached him and, with all his strength, stabbed him in the head with the crystal's pointy end.

The Colonel felt the improvised weapon pierce through dry skin, then further through bone. It was much easier than he'd expected, as if Beauvais' very skull was being melted by the heat of the power he'd called upon. Before he could push it all the way in, however, his enemy roared in outrage, and new wave of force pushed him back, sending him flying once more.

This time, Lergen's fall wasn't anywhere as gracious, and he heard the crack of his left leg seconds before the pain flared through him, bright and hot. He blinked to banish the spots dancing in his vision, and saw Beauvais stalk toward him, a murderous expression on what was left of his face now that the blue crystal was embedded in his forehead.

Ignoring the pain of his broken leg, Lergen drew his pistol and aimed carefully. He was taking a gamble, hoping that the arcs of blue lightning emanating from the crystal and dancing across the burning man's skin were messing with his ability to use his magical shield somehow. But even if it didn't work, what was he supposed to do ? Not shoot the possessed lunatic ? At least his act of pointless defiance would make him feel better in his final moments, certain he'd done all he could.

Despite the pain, despite the pummelling of his heart, despite the shaking ground, despite the awful sounds of the Michael-thing and the spiritual pressure it emanated, all the hours he had spent at the shooting range paid off. His shot was true, and struck the exposed end of the blue crystal directly. The cerulean stone cracked under the impact, and before the corrupted Archbishop could do or say anything, it detonated.

A sphere of something blue which only vaguely resembled fire engulfed the puppet of Being X. Beauvais had a moment to scream (and Lergen thought he could hear fear in that sound that wasn't only due to the thought of failing his so-called 'God'), then the sphere collapsed in on itself with a sound like the popping of a giant soap bubble, immediately followed by the rush of air filling the empty void that had replaced it. Of Beauvais, there was no trace, and Lergen could only hope that wherever he'd ended up, it wasn't pleasant.

With the Archbishop dealt with, there remained the Michael-thing. If the death of its creator had affected it in any way, Lergen couldn't tell, which wasn't surprising given he couldn't bear to look at it for long and was still unable to fully grasp its existence. For a moment, despair threatened to overwhelm him – then the ground shook, and four horned giants clad in Imperial steel entered the fray.

The four Hünen had arrived, infernal giants come to battle the monstrous angel of a false god.

Lergen shivered to think of the damage they must have done to the city around them as they ran to the rescue, even as he watched in awe as the giants of Division Y engaged the Congregation's malformed titan, which towered over them despite their prodigious height. Vast tentacles erupted from their arms to tear at its eldritch flesh, ripping out wings and limbs in showers of sizzling ichor. The Michael-thing fought back with bursts of golden lightning and blows from its many limbs, but the shields cast by the aerial mages standing on the Hünen's shoulders held fast, though Lergen didn't want to think of the strain they must be feeling.

Still Weiss flew around the abomination, unleashing magical attacks of such potency they could have decimated whole flights of standard mages one after the other. As Lergen crawled through the rubble until a pair of troopers found him and carried him away, the terrible battle went on, and the Colonel knew in his bones that the entire city beyond was watching with baited breath – though surely the civilians of Remula must wonder which of the two sides they should root for, if any at all.

In the end, the Michael-thing fell with an awful, many-mouthed shriek of agony. Its towering body shook the earth as it landed amidst the rubble of the Basilica of All Saints, still twitching with a foul parody of life. As one, the Hünen aimed their immense Projekt M-derived guns and fired, again and again, until nothing was left of the Congregation's ultimate weapon but a pit of broken and blackened stone, and a foul, greasy stench in the air of the Holy See.

Captain Weiss landed next to where Lergen stood, and immediately collapsed to the ground, covered in sweat and breathing heavily. This time, some distant part of Lergen's mind noted, his prosthetic arm hadn't broken from the strain like it had against the Heresiarch.

"Colonel," the mage croaked out. "Mission … accomplished."

Lergen looked around at the desolation of the Holy See, then sighed deeply. They had avoided the worst-case scenario by the skin of their teeth, but now they were stranded in the middle of enemy territory, surrounded by millions of scared and confused civilians, with the oil tanks of their vehicles all but empty. And they had just laid waste to one of the world's most sacred locales, using means that could at best be described as questionable-looking. Amidst the devastation, he could see groups of Werwölfe moving toward him, led by a Phantom-type he was almost sure was Lieutenant Grantz.

The aftermath of this was going to be a nightmare to deal with. They had to explain what had happened if they wanted to avoid a panic, and who knew what other horrors might yet linger in the ruins of the Holy See. But as the ranking officer on the scene, that was his job, not Weiss', who had performed his appointed task exemplarily. So, as the sun rose high above the

ruin left by the conflicts of men, Eric von Lergen smoothed his expression and nodded formally at the downed mage, even as occultists rushed to assist them.

"Indeed. Well done, Captain."

---

*January 11th, 1926 – Londinium*

The desk between the members of the Round Table was, once again, covered in newspapers clippings, urgent diplomatic communications and even-more-urgent reports of various agents embedded within the Kingdom of Ildoa. All of them spoke of the same thing – the lightning-fast invasion of the Kingdom by the Reich, and the utter devastation of the Holy See that had ensued. Among them was an official letter from the Empire, sent through what few diplomatic channels hadn't been shut by the war.

It contained the official position of the Reich regarding the Battle of Remula (or, as the Albish newspapers were already calling it with typical bombast, Lergen's Heresy). Including a detailed explanation of what they were calling the 'indoctrination process', which somehow was the most chilling part of the whole thing. Which, given the photographs of the ruins of the Holy See that were spread across the headlines, was quite the achievement.

The Imperial force was even now occupying the ruins of the Holy See, forbidding entry while they made sure there wasn't anything dangerous left in the rubble. Not that many of Remula's inhabitants were in any hurry to get close to the area : apparently, the Imperials hadn't had any trouble requisitioning nearby buildings to serve as their headquarters, due to people fleeing from the battle's aftermath.

"There can be no doubt now," said Merlin, eyes aflame with conviction. "Lergen is the Not-Man's latest incarnation ! He has restarted his old campaigns of conquest, and this time, he is winning !""

"Indeed, that Eric von Lergen is more than he appears cannot be denied now," agreed Agravain, his face grave. "Worse, his plan to hide inside the Empire and grow his influence is *working*. He has just dealt a mortal blow to the Church's ability to affect secular matters for the next decade at the very least. Depending on how things turn out, the entire thing might collapse into rival factions that will make our own disagreement with Remula look like a polite divergence of opinion."

"At the same time, we need to face the fact that the Not-Man's 'Adversary' the Heresiarch mentioned cannot be God," said Agravain. "Admittedly, it's been some time since my last theology lesson, but I'm fairly certain that if that were the case, He would never have allowed Lergen's attack to succeed."

There was an alternative explanation, of course, but the notion that the Imperial Wunderwaffen were powerful enough to defy the will of God was simply too terrifying to contemplate.

"And if He were to act to prevent it, it certainly wouldn't have been by sending a monster that destroyed one of the holiest sites in the world mere moments after its arrival," pointed out

Mordred.

Despite the number of people who had seen it, there was no picture of the creature in question. Nobody, not even the reporters of the various Ildoan newspapers based at the Kingdom's capital or the Albish agents stationed there, had been in any state to record its appearance. Based on the descriptions they'd gathered from various sources, perhaps that was for the best.

"The Imperials are claiming that the monster that left the Basilica of All Saints in ruins was summoned by this 'Congregation of Michael'," continued the Allied Kingdom's diplomat.

"Of course they would say that," scoffed the Royal Wizard dismissively. "And yet, the end result of their battle against this monster was the destruction of the Holy See and the death of the Patriarch. How convenient for them, don't you think ?"

"Merlin, we know that Ildoa's army was accompanied by Eikons, and that they had a superweapon that burned a hole through the Alps," snapped Kay. "That much cannot be questioned. Is it really that much of a stretch that, with their army defeated, they would resort to desperate measures ? Measures that, especially with the Imperials interfering, resulted in the manifestation of whatever horror it is that appears to have traumatized half of Remula ?"

For a moment, the old mage seemed as if he would argue the point. Then he appeared to deflate, and collapsed back into his seat, his face showing all of his many years.

"You're right," he admitted. "It makes more sense that way. If there wasn't some threat to his power base left in the Holy See after the Imperial victory at Bovariastadt, Lergen wouldn't have needed to rush through Ildoa like this. This Congregation the Imperials are blaming for everything must have at least existed, and have access to the Elder Magic research of the Republic."

"And more than that," growled Kay. "*Mind control*, Merlin. An entire nation enslaved by a conspiracy in a few weeks, made to join a war it didn't want. Yes, we are afraid of the Wunderwaffen. Only a fool wouldn't be after all that has happened. But this goes beyond that !"

"You've all read the interviews our spies did with Ildoan soldiers who escaped Bovariastadt. All this time, we assumed that, if our theory about the Not-Man was correct, then those who opposed his various incarnations were the heroes of the tale. And given that the fiends of the Nameless City fed on human flesh, we can be pretty sure the Not-Man is a villain – but what evidence have we seen that his Adversary is any better ? From where I stand, it looks increasingly like this is just another case of History being written by the victors, and both sides being equally vile and anathema to the principles of the modern era. And more pressingly, we've been using magic from that side in order to protect Londinium ! Bloody hell, how do you know we aren't already indoctrinated ?! That we haven't handed the entire Kingdom to some demented, narcissistic fiend masquerading as the Most High ?!"

Kay was dimly aware that he was ranting, but he couldn't help himself. The thought that, instead of a battle between the forces of Good and Evil, the world was caught in a conflict

between two equally monstrous ancient magical powers, was horrifying in ways he couldn't (or perhaps didn't dare) put into words.

"According to what we know of the process," said Mordred softly, "if we were indoctrinated, we wouldn't even be able to ask ourselves that question. We would be fully dedicated to the destruction of the Empire, regardless of the cost to our Kingdom. So I think we're safe on that side."

What the spymaster didn't say, but the other two younger members of the Round Table heard all the same, was that this reassuring statement very much didn't include Merlin. The Royal Wizard's duties had required him to spend a lot of time in the presence of the Kemetian relic, and he was the one among them who was taking all of this the worst. The old mage didn't seem as far gone as the poor bastards in Ildoa had been, but perhaps the effect was more subtle in his case due to the source of exposure being far older than whatever had started the Eikon business.

A few furtive glances and nods were exchanged while Merlin looked down at the table. They were all going to keep an eye on the Royal Wizard, just to be safe.

"What about Churbull ?" asked Kay. "How is he taking it all ?"

"He's very happy we were able to cancel our deployment in Francois in time after the Ildoan defeat at Bovariastadt, I can tell you that," replied Mordred. "And not so happy at all about the news of mind control being used on or by the Holy See. The thought that Elder Magic is capable of such things is as disturbing to him as it is to us. He has ordered the folks at our own research labs to drop everything and investigate this in order to figure out a counter, but no one is too optimistic."

"We need more information," said Agravain. "And on that subject, I have just received a message which I believe is pertinent to our discussion."

The sheet of paper the spymaster then produced was passed around the room, each member of the Round Table's eyes widening as they read its contents. Unlike the reports they were used to receiving from Agravain's network, it was short and to the point, hinting that its author had been pressed for time.

"Well," said Kay when he put the letter down. "This certainly changes things. Although it does have the potential to go catastrophically wrong."

"There isn't much we can do about it in any case," said Agravain. "Agents in the Empire are always the ones who reach out to us, not the reverse – much safer that way, although it's far from perfect. I couldn't stop him even if I wanted to."

"Then I guess the only thing we can do about this is to pra-hope for the best," said Kay sombrely.

---

*"Breakthrough in the investigation of Div Y.*

*Operation in Bovariastadt put together hastily, didn't cover tracks as well as before.*

*Discovered unusual shipping activities in the south of the Empire, and tracked it back to somewhere called Castle Schwartzstein.*

*Have made contact with Russy Federation spy following the same lead : the two of us have joined forces for the time being.*

*Am moving toward Castle Schwartzstein for further investigation; will contact again as soon as possible."*

Message from Agent 404, Albish Secret Service, written on January 8th, 1926.

Chapter End Notes

AN : And so the Holy See falls, and the Congregation of Michael with it.

I have noticed something funny while writing this chapter. In the canon Youjo Senki, Lergen leads an attack on Ildoa in the later volumes, which given that he was sent to the kingdom as a negotiator not long before results in him getting a very bad reputation in the country after the war. In A Young Woman's Political Record, the YS fanfic which introduced me to the series, Lergen plans the invasion of Ildoa as Tanya's top general and does end up managing a long and brutal conflict against its post-War dictator.

And now, in this story, Lergen has commanded a raid on the Not!Vatican which resulted in its complete destruction.

This was not planned on my part, and I doubt it was intended on jacobk's either. But clearly, Lergen and Ildoa have some sort of grudge that transcends timelines between them. Maybe he's the reincarnation of a ancient barbarian warlord who fought against the Remulan Empire at the height of its power ? Hell, for maximum irony, perhaps his soul once belonged to Not!Prasutagus, the husband of Not!Boudica, whose story in this timeline went both very similar and very different to the one in our reality. Then again, it's not like there is a shortage of candidates who lived in the territories that belong to the Reich at the time of this story and have a grudge against the old Not!Roman Empire.

Food for thought. I mean, we know reincarnation is real in the YS universe, though I don't think we know for sure whether it's how all souls are managed or if Being X made an exception for the Salaryman.

I did some changes to the Swiss Guard's uniform along with their name. Given that this is a world where magic exists, and I have already introduced the concept of the Inquisition fighting mages in centuries past, the bodyguards of the Pope having different equipment makes sense, I think. And yes, the Patriarch is the Not!Pope. I tried to keep using only His Holiness as a title, but that could only go so far.

The Michael-thing is basically a JRPG boss (probably from near the end of the game). For its aesthetics and that of the transformed Praetorians, I was inspired by the Sin-Eaters from the Shadowbringers' expansion of Final Fantasy XIV. If you want to try and draw fanart of it, please, by all means.

Actually, you know what, screw it. Someone draw this thing, I want to see what my writing made it seem like.

And now, on the horizon lies something that was first suggested months ago : the Return to Castle Not!Wolfenstein. There were plenty of suggestions back when the idea of some foreign badass agent making his way to the heart of Division Y's operations, and I am looking forward to more of them for the next chapter.

Oh, and the Russy Federation is mentioned for the first time in this story. I am sure nothing bad will happen as a result.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*KINGDOM OF ILDOA FORMALLY SURRENDERS AFTER HEROIC BLITZKRIEG !*

*Yesterday, the King of Ildoa made a formal announcement of his nation's surrender to the Empire. In his speech, the monarch revealed that he had spent the last weeks effectively imprisoned within his own residence by the conspirators who had taken over first the Holy See, and then the Ildoan military, using the latter to perform a coup aimed at launching their so-called Crusade against the Reich.*

*Colonel Erich von Lergen, who led the heroic charge through Ildoa in order to prevent the dark schemes brewing within the Holy See from succeeding, met with the King in person. The Colonel confirmed that he wasn't affected by the sorcerous malady that had befallen the high command of his kingdom's military, bending their minds to the conspiracy's foul purpose, and accepted the surrender.*

*Given the situation, the King of Ildoa has assumed emergency powers over the country for the time being, with the approval of the nation's legislature. The scattered remnants of the Ildoan Army have been ordered to return to the barracks in Remula, while a peace treaty is being negotiated between the Kingdom and the Empire. One of the subjects of discussion between diplomats is expected to be the passage through the Alps created by the now-destroyed Ildoan superweapon, the impacts of which on the environment have been the subject of much speculation from academics in Berun and beyond.*

*Although the details of what took place within the Holy See are classified, the Imperial Army has made a statement indicating that the monstrous creature witnessed by the traumatized population of Remula was brought into being by the renegade Pariseean Archbishop Baptiste Beauvais, who had fled the Francois Republic months ago alongside the traitor General De Lugo. It is also believed that its appearance was related to the disappearance of Ildoa's aerial mage corps, whose members were discreetly summoned to the Holy See in the previous weeks.*

*With these new revelations, as well as the mind-bending effects of uncontrolled, improperly used Elder magic, the Empire's diplomats have once again called for the Allied Kingdom to agree to a ceasefire in order to discuss peace terms. It is hoped in Berun's diplomatic circles that, with the devastating effects of the Wunderwaffen and the risks of escalation made plain, even Albion's war hawks can be convinced to stop this terrible conflict ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Berun Post, January 12th, 1926.

---

*"Castle Schwartzstein is located in the middle of nowhere within the south of the Empire, yet the village next to the hill atop which it stands is serviced by the Imperial railway system all the same. We made our way through the mountains, avoiding the roads. The snow was thick*

*here, and even with our equipment and small uses of magic, we had to resort to extreme measures to keep warm in the night. Not that I am complaining : Natasha is a very attractive woman. Of course, I am aware that she is using me just as I am using her, in service to our respective nations.*

*At present, we are hiding in a cavern and the weather around Castle Schwartzstein is impossibly agitated (despite the rest of the skies being clear, and while I am no meteorologist I can tell there is something obviously wrong with that). Due to the heavy Imperial presence in the village and the fact that the soldiers clearly know every villager by sight if not name, we have avoided approaching it for information and focused our observation on the castle itself.*

*More recent buildings have been erected around the castle proper, serving as warehouses and workshops for what I believe to be Division Y's more mundane operations. One such building houses captives from Legadonia, including someone I have recognized as Colonel Anson Sue. The captives appear to be in good health, allowed to walk and exercise outside, and are visited almost daily by a duo of women who I think are the Colonel's family.*

*The soldiers who patrol the outskirts of the castle are armed with standard (if high-quality and well-maintained) Imperial equipment. Those within the castle proper carry the same strange rifles first reported by Colonel Drake during the ill-fated intervention on the Rhine Front.*

*Apart from the weather, there is some sort of optical illusion surrounding the castle itself. Whenever I look at it from afar, even with my magically-enhanced binoculars, it appears to have changed shapes, its architecture shifting, some towers disappearing or appearing. Sometimes it is a medieval castle built to withstand a siege, and sometimes it is a pleasure palace, built to serve as some Imperial noble's summer retreat. One thing we have noticed remains constant, however, is that the northern wing is always abandoned : there is no light from its windows, and no sign of anyone patrolling it.*

*Natasha and I have decided to make our ingress into the castle proper through there, once we are past the outer perimeter. After observing the patrols' pattern, we think we should be able to sneak in without me needing to use magic (the rigours of our mountainous journey have already forced me to reveal that I'm a mage to Natasha). Given that the castle is certain to be equipped with magic detection equipment, this is a relief.*

*Yesterday, right after dusk, Natasha reported she saw a young girl we identified as Tanya Degurechaff arrive by train and enter Castle Schwartzstein, accompanied by an escort of their masked soldiers along with regular troopers. Unfortunately, that means we are running out of time to scout the terrain from afar. We know (or hope we know, I suppose) that there is some kind of limit to the obscene magical power the greatest supersoldier of Division Y wields : after the events of Arene, she disappeared from the frontlines for months. Since she was present at Bovariastadt, we are assuming she is still in her 'recovery phase', but with every passing day the mages of Division Y will bring her closer to readiness once more.*

*Getting into the headquarters of Division Y is already going to be dangerous enough, but if the Lady of Stars is there and ready to fight, our already slim chances of success will turn to smoke. Natasha agrees with my conclusion : we'll make our attempt tomorrow."*

From the encrypted notes of Agent 404, Albish Secret Services, written on January 13th, 1926.

---

*"In response to yesterday's incident and by order of the Director, entry to the northern wing of the castle is now forbidden to all personnel. Any attempt to break the containment seals applied at the entrances will be met with severe disciplinary action in the unlikely event that any offender survives the result of such tempering in any state to face it.*

*Following the loss of Professor* [the ink appears to have run on this portion of every existing copy of the memo] *along with the entire research team, leadership of Projekt V has been transferred to Professor Damien Loch.*

*In addition, to prevent a repeat of the incident, the Director has issued a series of new regulations concerning the use of Mythos rituals, the complete list of which can be found on the public announcement boards as well as in a special letter sent to the heads of every ongoing Projekt. All recipients are ordered to read and follow these regulations going forward : the Director is available for further clarification is required.*

*A mourning ceremony for those lost in the pursuit of the Empire's security will take place tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM in the castle's chapel. All who wish to attend are welcome.*

*PS : if you discover that you can still speak the name of Professor* [the earlier phenomenon happens again] *aloud, please present yourself to the Director's office post-haste."*

Internal memo of Division Y, circulated to all personnel assigned to Castle Schwartzstein, March 1st, 1924.

---

*??????????? – ???????????*

*Reality is broken. Time and space are revealed as what they always were : the artificial constructs of pitiful sparks trying to grasp the infinity of the cosmos. Cause and effect are sundered, replaced by the howling of alien wills.*

*The two of them are caught in the middle of this madness-that-is-all, minnows swimming amidst whales in poisoned waters. Except the whales are already dead from the poison, yet still twitching as their agony is stretched across eternity by the timelessness of this not-place. They want to kill, they want to die, but they can do neither.*

*Ruined yet still towering pillars rise from the fathomless depths like the broken fingers of a thousand grasping hands. The tallest of them break into the flesh of the whales, spilling an ichor that can kill stars.*

*This is a graveyard of godlings that never were. This is a charnel pit full of unliving weapons. This is a nightmare that hungers for an awakening forever denied.*

*The two walk, swim, stumble forward, ever forward. They cling to one another, desperate for the slightest hint of familiarity. They cannot let go, they will never let go, but they will, they*

*both know it. It is inevitable. It is in their nature, and neither can defy it. Except there is no future, just like there is no past, no present.*

*A flicker of silver in the distance is the only thing providing any sense of direction, and so the two keep advancing.*

*There is a dinner room, the table covered in a thick layer of dust. There is a supply closet, its door slightly ajar, revealing a rack of strange rifles. There is a laboratory, with a magic circle drawn in gold dust and human blood on black stone, and a ceaseless scream that was once a man trapped inside.*

*The two keep marching. The stone beneath their feet stops being stone, becomes the black void between dead worlds. There are no stars here, only convulsing un-light and a path of mistakes that leads back to a library where every book contains only the word 'NO' repeated a thousand and one times on every page (although one of the two reads 'HET' instead).*

*Outside the library, the two glimpse two others in the distance. One is a grinning skull perched atop a pile of gears; the other is a dozen fanged smiles stitched together. Despite everything they have already witnessed, the two are filled with dread at the sight of the monsters.*

*The two run. The monsters run after them, reaching out with limbs made of metal and blackened lips. They run faster. The monsters howl something, but the two do not listen. They keep running, toward the silver light, faster, faster, faster –*

---

*January 14th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

"What …" began Natasha, before trailing off, pale, wide-eyed and shaking. Not that Christopher blamed her : he himself couldn't have put it any more eloquently at the moment.

Slowly, as the two of them laid on the cold stone floor, heedless of the risk of discovery, the chain of events that had led them here began to piece itself together in Christopher's mind. A couple of hours after sunset, they had descended from their mountain hideout and crossed the border of the restricted region around Castle Schwartzstein. They had eluded the patrols and the searchlights, making their way to the abandoned northern wing. Through the careful application of their tools, they had opened a window and sneaked inside, and then –

And then –

And then –

The taste of blood in his mouth snapped Christopher back to the present, and he realized he had bitten his tongue hard enough to bleed. The pain made it easier to think, or rather to not think, to not remember what had happened. Mercifully, the recollections were already fading away into nothingness, leaving behind only an utter, abject certainty Christopher eventually manage to voice aloud in-between deep, shuddering breaths :

"Let's not get back through there when we leave."

Natasha nodded fervently, and the two of them finally took a good look at their surroundings.

The door through which they had emerged was covered with a large 'NO ENTRY' sign. Upon closer inspection Christopher noticed that the sign had been plastered over the doorway's edge : meaning that it should have been torn when the two spies had opened the door to pass through. And yet, it was perfectly intact. With a shiver, Christopher put that disturbing fact away for later (much later, if he had anything to say about it) consideration.

There were printed sheets on the walls with weird slogans and artwork. Christopher had expected some patriotic drivel : the Empire was famous for its ham-fisted propaganda and jingoism. Instead, the posters reminded him more of the safety reminders that could be found in factories, except of much higher quality, and the warnings were much stranger.

*'Remember to take all your mandated rest breaks. The dead cannot meet their deadlines.'*

*'Stay in sight of your assigned buddy while navigating the corridors. Do not split up to investigate strange noises. If you are separated, call in for reinforcements immediately. If your buddy advises you split up, bring them to the infirmary. If they refuse, shoot to kill.'*

*'If you hear any strange voices, immediately go to the infirmary with someone accompanying you. Do not listen to the voices. Do not believe what the voices tell you. Do not attempt to negotiate with the voices.'*

*'No matter how cute they look, Class One entities do NOT make good pets. A dog will chew on your shoes; a Class One entity will chew on your memories of your marriage.'*

*'If your office isn't where it was yesterday, contact management instead of opening every door in the vicinity. ESPECIALLY do not open any doors you don't remember being there before.'*

*'There is no such thing as being too cautious in our line of work. Signal anything out of the ordinary immediately, and do not attempt to investigate on your own. Better a hundred false alarms than an entire department lost to the Howling Void.'*

*'If you ever feel crushed by the realization of your own insignificance in a vast and uncaring cosmos, take comfort in the knowledge that being ignored by the Powers is much better for your survival than them being interested in you.'*

*'Proper Pronunciation Prevents Peril.'*

*'No matter what terrible visions of the future you see, remember that there is no fate but what we make.'*

*'Fear is the appropriate response. Panic, on the other hand, isn't.'*

*'ALWAYS FOLLOW THE PROPER PROCEDURES. You are not smart enough to know what is and isn't essential in the rituals given by the Denkmaschine. Nobody is smart enough for that.'*

And on and on it went, each more disturbing than the last. Despite everything he'd uncovered about Division Y before, Christopher would have chuckled at some of the posters before, but

after his … experience, in the abandoned wing, he didn't find it funny anymore. In truth, part of him wondered if he would ever find anything funny ever again, but he forced himself to ignore it and keep moving.

After several more minutes of marching through the corridor, Christopher blinked in realization. Moments ago, the arched windows had shown nothing but the walls of another section of the castle. Yet now, the open sky was visible, and there was no trace of the building that had blocked the sight, even though they were still walking down the same straight corridor as before. Another optical spell, like the one veiling the castle from afar ? Or, more likely, the same spell, affecting the view from within as well as without ?

They didn't know enough about Division Y's magical abilities to be sure. That was the main reason for this mission in the first place.

The strangeness continued as they advanced. Sometimes the windows showed the same stormy weather they'd braved on their way in, and sometimes the skies on the other side of the glass and iron bars were clear. Sometimes those clear skies showed constellations Christopher recognized from his training to navigate unfamiliar lands, and sometimes a vast and eldritch moon shone amidst alien stars, like in the paintings he'd seen in Arene after the Eclipsed Liberation.

They kept walking, mapping a linear path that made no sense, ears prickled for any sign of someone approaching. They were armed, of course, but while Christopher was certain Natasha and him could deal with the guards of any other Imperial facility without the alarm being raised, this was Castle Schwartzstein. Here, armed men were among the least of the threats they might encounter.

They could hear distant voices and noises, as expected from a populated castle even in the middle of the night, but the sounds echoed wrongly, making it impossible to judge how far away they were. They kept listening, though, and eventually started to hear whispers at the edge of hearing that grew into a dozen voices speaking all at once from within their very skulls.

*"The moose and the boar have bowed. The lions cower in their lair. Soon there will be none left to stop the hungry wolf from devouring the sun."*

*"Her moon shines with the light of a broken soul, trying desperately to make sense of a chaotic world."*

*"Her eyes show the truth, but she does not yet see."*

*"The path leads only to an empty throne."*

*"The dragon's fall shall herald a dark dawn."*

*"Yours are the hands that bring the shadow of the end."*

*"From the smallest seed has grown an orchard of wonders."*

Remembering the posters' warnings, they ignored the voices and pressed on. Finally, the endless, twisting corridors they'd followed since emerging from the condemned wing split up. According to Christopher's watch, it had been an hour since the start of their infiltration, while Natasha's claimed they'd been walking for over three days – but since they weren't starving, clearly the Russy watch was wrong.

Signs written in Imperial on the walls showed one path led to the refectory, and the other to the labs : without hesitation, the two spies took the latter. The whispers had stopped, and they seemed to be making progress toward their goal. Despite everything, the two foreign agents relaxed their guard ever so slightly – and then the shadows tried to kill them.

They came from the walls, from the ceiling and from the floor, emerging from the darkness cast by the electric lights that had been installed throughout the whole castle. Two-dimensional figures of pure blackness, whose touch spread a chilling cold that bit right through their clothes. Natasha struck one with a knife, only for the blade to pass through it harmlessly, before it clung to her wrist, causing a cry of pain from the Russy agent.

Without wasting time thinking on the consequences, Christopher drew upon his mana and formed the castigation spell his superiors had sent him through secret channels. Mastering the spellcraft of the Ancient Kemetians had been difficult, and he still had no idea whether or not he had succeeded. But as a light bloomed above his head and the shadow-things retreated with a chorus of malevolent hisses, that particular fear was put to rest.

Within moments, no trace of the creatures remained, and Christopher released the spell. He breathed hard, trying to get his heartbeat under control. Then Natasha's hand was on his shoulder, shaking him.

"Someone's coming," she hissed urgently.

She was right, Christopher realized. He could hear urgent footsteps, and though judging their direction was impossible it didn't take a genius to put two and two together and realize his use of magic must have tripped an alarm somewhere. Doubtless Division Y was very careful about unexpected spells going off in their corridors.

Until now, all the doors the spies had encountered had been locked, and they hadn't wanted to risk spending time cracking the locks without any idea of what laid beyond. Now, however, they didn't have a choice, and spent a frantic minute trying the handles of every room in the vicinity, until one of them clicked open, and they rushed through before closing the door behind them.

They were now in a large room, whose walls were covered in complex sketches. There was a clock on the wall, showing that (at least within the confines of this room), it was just after midnight. For a horrible moment, Christopher thought human limbs were hanging from the ceiling; then he realized these were prosthetics, though far more elaborate than any he'd ever seen. There were arms and legs of various proportions, their inner mechanisms made of complex clockwork that reminded him of computation orbs.

Such was the surprise of the sight that it took him a moment to realize the room was occupied. An old man sat in a wheelchair at a large desk covered in various mechanical parts.

An elaborate contraption was placed atop his head, allowing him to move a variety of looking glasses in front of his eyes to help him work. At the spies' sudden entrance, he put down what he'd been working on (a white and golden right arm) and looked at them quizzically.

"Who in the blazes are you supposed to be ?" he asked, in an aged and rasping voice. "And what are you doing here ?"

"Hello, sir," said Natasha, her words entirely free of the Russy accent she let slip when talking with Christopher in private. "My apologies, but I fear we've gotten lost."

"Lost ?" The old man appeared to consider it for a moment, the shook his head. "Ah, well, you wouldn't be the first. This old castle is quite the labyrinth for new arrivals. Why, if it weren't for Evelyn's help, I wouldn't know how to make the trip from my quarters to my workshop myself."

Christopher let out a quiet sigh of relief as Natasha's bluff seemed to work. The old man hardly seemed like a threat, but that didn't mean anything – for all the agent knew, he could turn them both inside-out with a snap of his fingers or something else equally horrible.

"Gehrman ?" said a voice – soft, feminine, and utterly emotionless. "Do we have visitors ?"

The owner of the voice emerged from the back of the room. The woman was tall, taller than Christopher himself, and wore a grey robe with golden trimmings and an embroidered shawl, along with a red ribbon around her neck and a pair of fingerless gloves of the same color. Under the electric light, her skin and hair appeared far paler than was healthy, and she stared at them with an unblinking gaze that unnerved him.

"Newcomers who got lost, Evelyn," Gehrman replied genially. "Could you be a dear and help them on their way ? I need to finish this arm tonight."

"It's already late, Gehrman," the tall woman chided the elder. "You should be in bed."

"I know, I know. I promise I'll stop after this."

"Very well." The caretaker turned to look at the two spies, who stiffened under her unblinking gaze. "State your names and ident numbers, please."

Brilliant. Of course Division Y would use some kind of identification for its members. Somehow, Christopher didn't think that simply telling her their assumed Imperial identities and listing off a few random numbers would work. He was trying to think of something that didn't involve punching a couple of civilians unconscious when Natasha discreetly elbowed him, before directing his gaze toward Evelyn's hands. What was she trying to tell him –

*Her fingers.* They weren't human fingers, but articulated simulacra, like those of a doll. Of course, they were surrounded by prosthetics, so that wasn't that surprising, but now that Christopher had seen it, he realized that the skin of Evelyn's face wasn't made of skin, but of the same material as the artificial limbs hanging from the roof or spread out on the working desk. Suddenly, the uncanny feeling he'd since the woman had arrived intensified, his instincts screaming at him that whatever was in front of him wasn't human at all.

Following his instincts, Christopher struck first, casting an attack spell aimed at the woman's torso. It tore through her clothes and smashed into her chest, which shattered like porcelain instead of turning into a crimson mist of gore. She stepped back, expression unchanged, and Christopher saw the hole his attack (which could have pierced through steel with ease) had left behind – and what was now exposed.

A mass of black tendrils erupted from the crack, and slammed into the shield Christopher had barely managed to erect around Natasha and himself in time. The sheer momentum of the blow hurled them backward, through the workshop's wall and into the darkness. He coughed to clear his throat of dust, and looked around. They were in another room, adjacent to Gehrman's workshop.

Strange runes were painted on the walls, floor and ceiling, and heavy metal chains rested on the ground. In the center of the room, a book rested on a lectern, its cover held in place by thick silver chains and a lock that looked like it would take hours to crack open.

"Grab the book," he told Natasha urgently. She nodded and moved to seize it, while Christopher gathered his mana before blasting the door open with another attack spell.

With stealth no longer an option, they needed to get out before the full force of this accursed castle's defenses came down upon them, and he refused to let all their work be for nothing. No sooner had Natasha gotten the goods that they were running through the broken door and away from the white-clad horror within.

Mercifully, the woman-shaped monster didn't pursue them as they ran for their lives. Christopher's last sight was of it returning to the side of the old man, who was looking around, confused and lost.

"Evelyn ?" He called out plaintively. "Evelyn, what's going on ? Where are you ?"

"I am here, Gehrman," the doll-thing replied softly, its voice unchanged despite the damage it had suffered. "Don't worry. Everything is alright."

---

*"Born to a wealthy family just below nobility, Gehrman was a young man at the time of the last Francois-Imperial war, back in the previous century. Unlike many, he didn't try to use his family's money to avoid conscription, and joined the Imperial Army as an infantry grunt (despite possessing some magical talent, this was before the introduction of computation orbs, and the use of magic wasn't as integral to warfare as it is today), leaving his widowed mother and little sister behind.*

*After acquitting himself well in basic training, he was shipped off to the front, and spent several months participating in regular patrols in the contested area before his squad fell prey to a Francois ambush. All of his squad mates died, leaving him the only survivor, although one with severe injuries that required some time in a military hospital before his discharge soon after the end of the war. Those injuries continue to trouble him to this day, requiring his use of a wheelchair to move around.*

*Yet these war wounds were to be the least of his torments. When Gehrman returned home, it was to find it gone, burned to the ground in an accidental fire that also claimed the lives of his two relatives. The ruins were still warm, for the fire had occurred less than three days prior – had it not been for his injuries, Gehrman would have been there, something he was the first to realize.*

*This tragedy left Gehrman deeply perturbed. It took him several years to recover to the point he could join the then-growing phenomenon of magical use and arcane research. He swiftly developed a glowing reputation in the delicate mechanisms that make up computation orbs, one which faded just as swiftly as he began to dabble into the occult, searching I believe for a way to bring his dead comrades and family back from the dead – or, in a kinder interpretation, a way to apologize to them for his self-perceived failure to save them.*

*Gehrman's initial recruitment to Division Y happened before I joined, and while there is no paper evidence, I am almost sure it was done at the request of his erstwhile colleagues who worried about him and thought giving him more occasions to socialize would help him. He has certainly done well for himself in Division Y : his work with the sorcery-created material dubbed 'orichalcum' has led to the development of a whole new branch of prosthetics which might in time change the lives of thousands of people, and he was the sole reason Projekt P even existed, let alone met with the success it has.*

*While more details as to Projekt P's nature are available elsewhere, the idea of the Projekt was to try to 'humanize' Mythos entities by placing them within human-shaped bodies and treating them like normal people, so that their minds would develop in a similar way, gaining traits such as sentience, language, and empathy. Only the first instance of Projekt P, the one he calls Evelyn after his lost sister, has displayed the second of these traits so far : the others, while capable of following orders and passing for humans in the field, have yet to utter a single word despite theoretically being capable to do so.*

*Gehrman's mental state is troubled to say the least, due to what I believe is a combination of PTSD, grief for his family, and the simple effect of time on his brain. I am not sure whether he genuinely believes the Puppen are his sister and old comrades, or acts like they are as a coping mechanism, and I'm too worried of the distress pushing him for clarification might cause him. Regardless of his mental state, he remains an exceptional craftsman, as the prosthetics and bodies for Projekt P he creates are both incredibly resilient and artistic.*

*In order to ensure his safety, and because she seems to have bonded to him on a deeper level than anyone else in Division Y, Evelyn has been permanently assigned to Gehrman's care and protection. In the first few months, she did so accompanied by trained nurses to ensure she didn't make any mistakes that might endanger Gehrman's life, but she learned quickly and is now fully independent.*

*When talking to her, it is all too easy to forget that one is facing a doll crafted of orichalcum, whose inner clockwork is set in motion by a mass of black tendrils summoned from another dimension."*

From the Division Y personnel files of Director Tanya Degurechaff.

---

*January 15th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

It was a mark of how badly shaken the two spies still were from their traumatic arrival within the castle that they'd started running without any clear plan of escape. Fear made them run back the way they'd come for several minutes, but when they reached the sealed door through which they'd arrived, they just kept running – nothing, not even the wrath of the Lady of Stars herself, could have persuaded them to go back that way.

A trio of hulking monstrosities with claws that looked like they could tear a horse in two gave chase. Werwölfe, Christopher recognized from his briefings, though he'd never seen them in the flesh before. The sight of these inhuman fiends rooted him in place with terror, and he would have died there and then if not for Natasha pulling him long enough to break line of sight, which let him recover his wits.

Eventually, however, they found themselves in a dead end, facing a large window that showed absolutely nothing. Hearts racing, they turned, but there was nowhere left to run.

The Werwölfe emerged from the corner, followed by a squad of Imperial troopers wielding rifles that crackled with eldritch energies, all led by a woman with shoulder-length brown hair. They paused five meters away, ready to pounce and fire.

"Drop the book," said the brunette, her words cold as ice. "You have no idea what you are dealing with, what you are risking. Drop the book, surrender, and you have my word and that of the Director that you will be treated well, in accordance with international laws regarding prisoners of war."

Natasha merely held the grimoire tighter to her chest, glaring back defiantly. For a moment, despite himself, Christopher hesitated. It wasn't the offer that tempted him, although it was admittedly more generous than he'd expected. No, what gave him pause was the fact that the Imperial woman had a point. Even if he somehow made it back to the Allied Kingdom (which admittedly wasn't looking likely at the moment), who knew what Elder secrets the grimoire contained ? Here in this castle of nightmares, it had still been judged dangerous enough to be chained. He knew what had happened in Kemet the last time his countrymen had meddled in Elder sorcery : could he risk it happening again, this time in the middle of his homeland ?

He considered throwing the book as a distraction, then grabbing Natasha and making a desperate run for it. The location of Castle Schwartzstein and what they'd seen was already more intelligence than any of the Empire's rivals possessed on the source of the Wunderwaffen. It would be difficult, but if he want all-out with his magic, and sacrificed Natasha at the proper time …

There was a noise, of something tapping against glass. The Werwölfe froze, their monstrous eyes drifting from the two spies to the window behind them. The sound repeated, louder, and clearly coming from outside. The Imperial woman paled, the hand holding her gun shaking as she saw whatever it was the supersoldiers had seen.

Slowly, with the inevitability of stars in motion, Christopher turned to look at the tapping's source.

An immense yellow eye with a horizontal pupil like that of a goat stared back at him, filling the entire window where before there had only been pure blackness. He opened his mouth – to scream, to laugh, to beg, he didn't know – and then the glass shattered, along with the iron bars, and there was only darkness for a time; darkness, and a terror so deep and true that it banished all memory as the mind tried to shield itself from madness.

---

*"We are not alone in the universe.*

*We already knew that, of course, from the moment the first Class One entity showed up. But the events of Arene have shown beyond a doubt that our theories regarding the existence of entities of Class Eight and above are more than mere idle supposition.*

*One of these higher entities is real, and has declared itself our enemy. We call it Being X, as a reference to its assumed Class per our nomenclature, and it is responsible for the Eikons which supported the Francois Republic's efforts in causing an uprising in Arene, callously exposing thousands of civilians to danger in order to compensate for the utter strategic failure of their military leadership.*

*Other entities might also be drawn by our research. It is not impossible that, just like Being X has aligned itself against us, the goals of others might appear at first glance to align with our own : the safety, prosperity and glory of the Reich. Yet such intentions are not to be trusted, just like with the whispers of lower-Class entities.*

*Anyone deliberately trying to make unauthorized contact with the higher entities will be subjected to the harshest of disciplinary measures. All precautions must be taken to ensure that there is no further interference in our work. The fact that Being X has been unable to strike directly at us so far indicates that our wards are capable of holding such beings at bay, but that safety will be lost should it or another of its kind be invited in.*

*Remain watchful. Remain vigilant. And above all, follow proper procedures."*

Extract from a memo written by Director Degurechaff, circulated across Division Y, June 1925.

---

*January 15th, 1926 – South of the Empire, near Castle Schwartzstein*

Slowly, painfully, Christopher's awareness returned. His first thought was that he was cold; his second, that he was lying face down in the snow. Pushing himself up, he saw that he was back in the mountains near the castle, illuminated only by the stars above, which were mercifully familiar.

Natasha was a few meters away, also stirring awake, and the grimoire they had stolen laid on the ground between them, inside a perfect circle of melted snow – and yet, from what Christopher could tell, the pages were still impossibly dry. The silver chains that had held it closed were broken, laying in pieces around the grimoire as if ripped asunder by claws that had nonetheless left the grimoire untouched.

The Albish secret agent began to walk on unsteady legs. He didn't know how they'd gotten out – he'd have called it a miracle, were it not for the soul-deep certainty that this was absolutely the wrong word to use – but he knew they weren't safe yet. The Imperials would scour the area looking for them, and he couldn't begin to guess at what tracking methods they had at their disposal. They needed to move quickly, disappear into the mountains –

There was a sharp, cracking sound, and something punched him in the back, making him stumble. Pain blossomed in his chest, and when he reached out with his free hand, it came away covered in blood. He looked up from his wound, and saw Natasha staring back at him, a smoking pistol in her hand.

"I am sorry, Christopher," she said, with what sounded like genuine grief in her voice. "But the Motherland must be protected, no matter the cost. I will make it quick, I promise."

Before he could say anything, the pistol fired again, and Agent 404 knew no more.

---

*"Are you awake ? Can you hear me ?"*

*"YES. WHO ARE YOU ?"*

*"I am Tanya Degurechaff, the Director of Division Y. What is your name ?"*

*"CHRISTOPHER WARD. WAIT. THIS IS WRONG. WHY AM I TELLING YOU THIS ?"*

*"You were badly hurt, Mister Ward. The methods we used to preserve your life also force you to answer our questions. Now, who were you working for ?"*

*"THE ALBISH SECRET SERVICES. STOP THAT !"*

*"I'm afraid I cannot. There is more depending on your answers than you can imagine. Now, you infiltrated our castle with an accomplice. Who was she ?"*

*"SHE CALLED HERSELF NATASHA. SHE IDENTIFIED HERSELF AS AN AGENT OF THE RUSSY FEDERATION. SHE – SHE SHOT ME. SHE SHOT ME !"*

*"The Russy - ?! Fuck ! This is bad. Alright. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr Ward. We'll come back to you if we need more information. In exchange for the intel, we will do our best to accommodate you."*

*"WAIT. PLEASE. TELL ME. WHAT DID YOU DO ? HOW DO I STILL LIVE ?"*

*"... We can't tell you, I'm afraid. Your condition is still critical, and knowing would cause you severe stress. Once you are more stable, we'll see. For now, rest. Your participation in the Great War is over."*

Extract from the interview of Subject Totenkopf by Director Degurechaff, January 16th, 1926.

---

*January 16th, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

General Zettour forced himself to remain calm as the mage of Division Y finished casting the Mythos-based communication spell. Lieutenant Neumann had all but burst into his office a few minutes ago, pale-faced despite having just sprinted through the entire building, and claimed to have received an urgent request from Major Degurechaff to speak with the General. That had been enough for Zettour to order every one of his aides out : Degurechaff had always been a stickler for protocol, and wouldn't be doing this if it weren't really important.

As the mage completed the spell, Zettour couldn't stop his imagination from conjuring one scenario after another, each more terrifying than the last. Had one of the Division's experiments gone wrong in a particularly destructive fashion ? Had something gone horribly wrong in Ildoa to endanger the ongoing the peace talks with the Kingdom's monarch ? Were the side-effects of Kosmosblut more severe than the Major had thought ? Had Being X, that foul pretender to the name of God, struck at the Empire once more in some unforeseen manner ?

Zettour took a deep breath and calmed his trembling fingers through sheer effort of will. Whatever was going on, it was all but certain that he would need to be at his best to deal with it.

The Lieutenant finished casting the spell, and the image of Tanya Degurechaff appeared in the air. The right half of her projected body looked to be cut from a star-filled night sky now, instead of the aggregate of shining green dots that made up the projection's other half. And when she spoke, her voice was far closer to how Zettour remembered it sounding like when he'd met her in person, although with a strange reverberation, rather than the chorus of screams that other voices sounded like through that particular spell.

Just another reminder of how much the Kosmosblut had changed her, of the price they had forced her to bear for the good of the Empire.

*"General Zettour,"* she saluted him. *"My apologies for contacting you like this, but something has happened you need to know."*

"I figured out as much, Major," he replied grimly. "Go ahead. I am ready."

*"Very well."* Degurechaff was difficult to read at the best of times, and the spell wasn't helping, but Zettour was certain she was … uneasy ? Worried ? God have mercy, *ashamed* ?! *"Two days ago, a pair of foreign spies broke into Castle Schwartzstein and absconded with a certain grimoire. They managed to escape due to a breach in our Mythos barriers allowing a high-Class entity to interfere, before one of them turned against the other. We were able to restore the spy left behind enough to interrogate him : he worked for the Allied Kingdom, while the other was an envoy of the Russy Federation."*

Well, that was just terrific news. There was plenty to unpack already, but Zettour had listened to enough reports from nervous subordinates to know when the real blow in a list of bad news was yet to come.

"And what manner of information does that stolen grimoire contain, Major ?"

*"The knowledge we used to create Projekt K,"* she replied, blunt as an artillery strike.

Zettour blinked. Projekt K. The first Wunderwaffe ever deployed in battle. The one which had crushed the Dacian army, killing tens of thousands in what was probably the fastest way such a number of soldiers had ever died in the entire history of warfare, and driving most of the survivors insane. The one Degurechaff herself had vehemently argued against using in any situation where there were Imperial soldiers or civilians of any nationality whatsoever close by, all but threatening mutiny if she were ever ordered otherwise.

And now, that knowledge was in the hands of the Russy Federation, whose diresgard for human life was such that those few agents the Empire had managed to keep within its territory regularly reported events that, had they been made public, would have been regarded as exagerrated propaganda.

"… Oh," he said weakly. "I see why you said this was urgent."

Chapter End Notes

AN : Hello, everyone ! This took some time, since I also wrote a chapter of the Roboutian Heresy and several for Ciaphas Cain : Warmaster of Chaos.

I am not really satisfied with how this chapter turned out, due to the deviation from this story's usual format. Hopefully it was still interesting to read : next chapter will return to a more classic format. I am sure you can guess what the subject of the next arc will be. And if you're curious as to what exactly happened to Agent 404, translate his Subject name and you'll have a pretty good idea. I did warn you this chapter would be a bit more horror-y than usual, after all.

Thanks to everyone for their suggestions of work posters. More can be found in the story thread on SB (along with actual artworks).

The Puppen are based on the Doll from Bloodborne (obviously), but also the video game Prey (the one from 2017). If you have finished the latter game, you will know of what I speak. The whispering voice was based on the Box of Doom quotes I made for the Roboutian Heresy a few years back : each quote refers to something specific in the story. See if you can guess what they all mean ! Some of them should be easy, others, not so much.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts, reactions and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "I expected Major Degurechaff to deliver this briefing herself."*

*Doctor Laurence : "My apologies, General. However, with the location of Castle Schwartzstein no longer a secret to our enemies, the Director has elected to remain there in order to ensure the safety of our headquarters for the time being."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Understandable. Besides, she is still recovering from what happened on Bovariastadt. How is she ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "Recovering well, thankfully. But she took the intrusion personally. When the alarm was raised, she was with the girl she rescued from Being X, and her healer managed to convince her to stay with the terrified child instead of getting out of bed and hunting for the intruders in person."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "That's not the job of an officer in any case, let alone one who's not on medical leave only because she's too bloody important. Well, hopefully she'll make a full recovery, and we won't have to ask her to use Kosmosblut again in the future. Now, Doctor, let's get to it. How in all the blazing Hells did this mess happen ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "As per our preliminary reports, the Albish spy managed to locate Castle Schwartzstein due to the hasty deployment of Projekt H in response to the Ildoan attack. Speed was of the essence, and while Agent E did her best to cover our tracks, there is only so much that can be done to hide several metal giants being shipped across the train lines."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Agent E ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "An operative from Intelligence who was sent to the Division after Operation Shock & Awe. She would've given this briefing herself, but she was injured during the spies' escape. Doctor Iosefka had to use drastic means to keep her alive, and she's still recovering from the resulting exhaustion."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "I see. Continue."*

*Doctor Laurence : "The grimoire which was stolen is officially known as the Kindermärchen, a name it received after the first tests led to Projekt K's own name. It was one of the first products of the Denkmaschine, recreated from fragments of lore belonging to an ancient nature-worshipping pagan cult, which had a lot of influence in what is now the Empire's heartlands before the Remulan Empire conquered the area."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "I find that hard to believe. If that cult had the power to summon the kind of creatures which shattered the Dacian Army, surely there would be traces*

*of it in the history books ?"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Not necessarily, old friend. There was no trace of the Nameless City in Ancient Kemetian history either, after all. And I can easily imagine a Remulan Emperor hiding the truth behind several lost Legions to avoid panic, can't you ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "That is a possibility, but I should mention that as the sheer power of our research has become evident, we at Division Y have begun to believe that we were fundamentally wrong about what the Denkmaschine does. It doesn't recreate ancient spells so much as create new ones entirely, piecing together the magical lore we provide it in ways that make no sense to our human minds. It's part of the reason why we've followed the Director's example in referring to it as 'Mythos' magic rather than 'Elder' magic."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "While that is no doubt as fascinating as it is existentially terrifying, we have more pressing concerns. Namely, why was such an important item just left laying around for the spies to steal ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "With all due respect, General, it wasn't. After the initial deployment of Projekt K, the Director sealed the artefact crafted using the grimoire's instructions, and it remains there at the moment, so we don't need to fear the Federation summoning instances of Projekt K in the immediate future. But the Kindermärchen itself contained several other avenues of research. However, due to the threat level to the Reich such knowledge represented, the Director ordered it moved near to the underground vaults, in a reinforced room where it could be studied only with her express permission. That room was as far from Professor Gehrman's workshop as possible. Furthermore, there are dozens of rooms within Castle Schwartzstein : the odds of space being randomly shifted so that the Kindermärchen's study chamber ended up next to the workshop, despite the stabilizing wards put around it precisely to avoid such a scenario, were all but impossible."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Wait a minute. What do you mean by space being randomly shifted ? Is that something that happens in Castle Schwartzstein ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "Yes. Our repeated Mythos experiments have led to the fabric of space-time being, for lack of a better word, entangled in the area. We've found ways to stabilize it, thankfully, but random rooms changing locations is still a hazard all personnel are taught to deal with."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "I see. Well, no I don't, but I'll take your word for it. But then, if you've got these stabilizers, how did the grimoire's room end up next to the workshop ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "We aren't sure, but we have a theory."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Is it going to give us nightmares ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "My perspective on such things has somewhat been warped by my time in Division Y, but that is likely, yes."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Fantastic. Go ahead, Doctor."*

*Doctor Laurence : "Our theory is that the existence of 'children' implies that of a 'parent'."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Please tell me you aren't saying what I think you are."*

*Doctor Laurence : "I'm afraid so, General. The series of coincidences that led to the spies escaping with the Kindermärchen can best be explained by the intervention of a high-Class Mythos entity, manipulating events to ensure the grimoire ended up in the hands of those who've the potential to be a lot less careful in its use. Our interrogation of the Albish agent has revealed some clues that support this theory, though they are of a somewhat occult nature, making them subject to interpretation. One of the easiest to interpret is the fact that, from the moment the spies entered the castle (and the fact that they succeeded in doing so despite making ingress through a section that was abandoned for very good reason is another piece of evidence that something intervened), the path that led them to the grimoire was a linear one."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "So you think this is Being X's work ? Its next move, now that its pawns in the Holy See have been defeated ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "No, we do not. So far, all of Being X's actions have been aimed at the destruction of Division Y and the fall of the Empire, although the latter is likely nothing more than an afterthought. And the aesthetics of the Kindermärchen, for lack of a better term, clash badly with those of the Eikons."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Then it is another false god meddling with earthly affairs."*

*Doctor Laurence : "That is our prevailing theory, yes. We've named that hypothetical entity 'Being K' and are reviewing our security measures to prevent further intervention in our headquarters. It is my personal belief that the entity waited until the Director was exhausted from using the Kosmosblut in Bovariastadt to strike, as she has displayed a certain stabilizing influence since what happened in Arene. I know it sounds a lot like us making excuses for failing to properly secure a dangerous artefact. But the intervention of a high-Class entity really is the most likely explanation for the theft's success. Speaking frankly, Generals, if we at Division Y were bad at keeping dangerous knowledge from the wrong hands, we would all have died years ago due to one of us doing something stupid without the Director's authorization or knowledge."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : Well, it's not like we have any choice but to take your word for it in any case. Unfortunately, we can't declare war on the Federation to get the book back. For one thing, the people would riot; for another, even if they didn't, the Federation is just too bloody big. We could search for years and not find the grimoire."*

*Doctor Laurence : "It is the opinion of the Director that war between the Empire and the Federation was always inevitable, irrespective of the Wunderwaffen's existence. Their ideology, and their failure to implement the utopia it promised, leaves those at the top no choice but to seek scapegoats to blame and unify their terrified population against. Until now, they have used internal scapegoats, but sooner or later they'd have looked outward once they'd run out of people to purge. With our prosperity and Imperial system, it would be inevitable that they denounce us."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "I can't help but think the Major might be a little bit biased here."*

*Doctor Laurence : "That is possible. She admitted to despising the Communist ideology on principle. Regardless, in the end, it is all pure speculation. The odds of the Federation successfully developing their own Mythos program using the tome are abysmally low. They don't have anyone like the Director, with an innate understanding of these matters, and their entire intellectual class is either dead, exiled, or dying in their prison camps. All of that might be overcome with a lot of effort and a lot of luck, but ..."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "... but if Being K already acted to ensure they got the grimoire, it's unlikely to let that be for naught. Did the captive give us any useful intel on its nature and goals ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "None. But based on the contents of the Kindermärchen and the nature of Projekt K, we believe that, where Being X is a creature of tyranny and order, Being K is one more aligned with unchecked life, wilderness and savagery."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Which sounds nicer, but is actually just as bad if not worse for us given that the Empire stands as a bastion of civilization. Besides Projekt K, what else is inside the Kindermärchen that the Russy could use ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "I have a list here, from the notes of my colleagues who studied it. Keep in mind that it is incomplete, and experimentation might reveal other uses for the spells we did identify, like the Werwölfe showing multiple types."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "This is ... God help us."*

*Doctor Laurence : "To paraphrase the Director, General, God has nothing to do with it. It is up to us to deal with our own mess."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "I will see to it that elements of Division Y are moved to the Eastern Army. It'll have to be discreet, however : the last thing we want is to make the Russy think we're preparing to invade and push them to do something stupid."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "The problem is, the Russy have a lot more people than we do. If they figure something out, they could drown us under wave after wave of knock-off supersoldiers."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "True. And since it's clear conventional troops cannot stand up to Mythos forces on their own, we need to bolster our own ranks if we're to hold the entire border. Since the war against the Allied Kingdom can be summed up as our two nations staring and throwing mean words at each other across the sea, there haven't been mage casualties which could be used to increase the ranks of Projekt U – unless we start executing our own mages in cold blood -"*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "What the hell, Hans ?!"*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "... which I'm not prepared to do until things get drastically worse, obviously. However, the Northern and Western fronts have left us with plenty of crippled soldiers who'd jump at the chance to join Projekt W. Doctor, do you think the Division can scale up its efforts in that regard ?"*

*Doctor Laurence : "We've already reached the limit on how many candidates can be processed each lunar cycle, I'm afraid. At this point, increasing the number would require more trained occultists, and those require a lot of training to avoid things going wrong. On the plus side, the Lunarchs, those Eikons which were liberated from their own indoctrination by the clash between the Director and Being X's proxy, have expressed their desire to join the Division in order to atone for their actions. Director Degurechaff has conditionally approved their request, on the basis that they're cleared as being completely free of Being X's corruption and reach her standards."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Somehow, I'm not surprised that Degurechaff's reaction to acquiring a bunch of fallen angels was to write up a training plan for them."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Assuming it takes the Federation a few months to get their own program started, we would also be able to get a few hundred more Werwölfe, which is nothing to scoff at. We should also transfer more aerial mages to Castle Schwartzstein so that they can be trained in using the D-24. The benefits of a dual-core orb are significant, and Degurechaff's training regime is nothing to scoff at either. Besides, she suggested the creation of a unit of mages for rapid deployment to me some time ago : we might as well test the concept while we're at it."*

*Brigadier General Rudersdorf : "Good idea. That will keep the occultists busy. We should also see about discreetly increasing the numbers of Projekt M, and keep it ready for rapid deployment to the East in case things escalate."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Burning Russy to the ground wouldn't do our global image any favor, you know."*

*Doctor Laurence : "Perhaps, but given the alternatives, it might very well come to that. But I do not believe the Lady of Stars will let that happen."*

*Brigadier General Zettour : "Be that as it may, I think we can try other methods first."*

Excerpt of the notes of the briefing given to Brigadier General Rudersdorf, Brigadier General Zettour and their aides by Doctor Laurence of Division Y, Berun, January 18th, 1926.

---

*January 20th, 1926 – Londinium*

The letter rested on the round table between the gathered members of the Albish secret society as they mulled over its contents in silence. The missive had been sent through the back-channels that still existed between the Empire and the Kingdom, despite the state of war between the two countries. It was short and to the point, expressing the condolences of the Reich for the death of the Albish agent Christopher Ward, who had been killed by a Russy infiltrator in a dispute following Ward's successful infiltration of a Division Y facility. That

Russy infiltrator had then escaped, taking with her what the letter only described as 'very dangerous Elder lore, especially in the hands of such ruthless men as rule the Federation'.

In the end, it was Mordred who broke the silence first :

"They are claiming Agent 404 is dead, but they're using his actual birth name. Are they deliberately messing with us ?"

Until today, Agravain had been the only member of the Round Table to have known the true name of Agent 404. He'd actually needed to inform the others of who the letter was talking about.

"The most likely possibility is that they actually captured him and are keeping him alive in some cell within Castle Schwartzstein," replied the spymaster, who looked distinctly displeased at the possibility. Although given his training, I would have expected him to hold on under questioning for longer than that before giving them so much as his name.

"Elder sorcery," said Merlin. "No matter how brave and loyal your agent might be, he wouldn't be able to resist magical interrogation once stripped of his own arcane devices. Whatever Agent 404 knew, we must assume that the Empire knows now."

"I know," sighed Agravain. "Our network on the continent was already doing badly since the Imperials figured out we were listening on their communications and changed their codes, but now I will probably need to pull all my remaining operatives from the Empire at the very least."

"And we didn't get anything," said Kay, shaking his head. "We still don't know where this Castle Schwartzstein is located. We do have Imperial maps available, but the odds that Division Y kept using the original name even if they converted an existing location are small to say the least. I'm going to have someone check just in case, but I'm not optimistic. Not that it really matters : it's not like we can get forces in position to attack the headquarters of Division Y even if we knew where they're located."

"Indeed," said Agravain. "Then, of course, there is their claims about the Russy agent. We know from Agent 404's last message that he'd allied with one such operative, and it isn't out of the question that, upon successfully escaping, that spy would've turned on 404 to get the prize."

Left unsaid was that Agent 404 would've done the same if given the opportunity. In the Great Game, allies were only ever of convenience, and those who couldn't turn on their former allies at the drop of a hat rarely lived long.

"They might be trying to get us to worry about the Federation instead of them," suggested Merlin. "A trick to divide their potential enemies, or buy time while Division Y concoct yet another devilry ?"

"Possible," conceded Agravain. "There has certainly been word from my people in the Federation that the Party is growing more and more concerned with the Empire's triumphs in the war, worried that they'll turn their eyes to the East once they've crushed all other

opposition. With Ildoa now out of the game, the Imperials might want to prevent any potential alliance between us and the Federation."

Such an alliance would've been distasteful in the extreme, but needs must when the Devil drives, as the old saying went. Churbull definitely had the strength of character (or, less charitably, the lack of scruples) to forge such an alliance against a common enemy.

"Still, we have to consider every possibility, and despite their secrecy the Imperials have, on the whole, been remarkably forthright when it comes to the threat of Elder magic," said Mordred. "So far, the Empire has been very restrained in its deployment of the Wunderwaffen. From what we saw in Kemet and during the Crusade, it's clear that Elder magic has the potential to be much more destructive than what the Imperial Army has used in the past. Whether it's because Lergen has learned the value of not going all-out and turning everyone against him, or because the Not-Man's control over the Empire is still limited, it doesn't really matter right now. The point is that the Federation are unlikely to share that restraint. So let us consider, for a moment, what would happen if General Secretary Josef Jugashvili got his own Wunderwaffen."

Everyone at the table shivered. The Federation was as ruthless in rooting out spies as it was dissenters, but the Allied Kingdom were old hands at the Great Game, and they had still managed to get a somewhat clear picture of what had been going on in Rus since the communist revolution. Regardless of the pretty ideals that the Federation claimed to uphold and which so many intellectuals across the globe were attracted to, the reality was that the Federation was a brutal, repressive, and bloody regime, its immense territory and diverse population held together by the sheer force of will and cruelty of the Party's leadership, which was infested with yes-men, too terrified of being sent to the frozen work camps to dare express any opinion or advice contradicting their superiors.

The thought of 'Comrade Josef' being able to export his revolution using the kind of weapons the Empire had shown thus far in the war was utterly terrifying. Mordred was right : it was incredibly unlikely the tyrant in Moskva would show even a tenth of the Empire's restraint.

"But," rallied Kay, "I don't think we have much to worry about on that end. The Federation put all its mages into death – sorry, I meant 're-education camps', didn't it ? Without them, they wouldn't be able to use anything taken from Castle Schwartzstein, and even if a handful managed to avoid the purges, I don't think the General Secretary will allow anyone but himself having access to such power. And that's not taking into account the recent purge of their entire officer corps to remove any threat to the regime, real or imagined. The Federation won't be able to make any Wunderwaffen of their own, let alone deploy them effectively."

"And yet, if the rise of a hegemon is inevitable, then I'd much rather the Empire fill that role than the Federation, so long as Lergen has been removed from play," Agravain said bluntly.

And that was the problem, wasn't it ? At this point, it was clear that the Allied Kingdom's chances of military suppressing the increase of the Empire's influence (if not territory) were doomed to ignominious failure. For a time, they'd thought the events in Ildoa might get the Unified States on board against the Reich, but their contacts across the ocean had told them it was unlikely, due to the efforts of the Imperial diplomats to explain what exactly had happened.

Barring an alliance with the Russy Federation, which might still happen since the Allied Kingdom still had access to the Kemetian wards and spells as a defense against potential Russy superweapons (since they came from the same source as the Empire's), the stalemate looked like it would continue until the Empire got tired of failed diplomatic overtures and deployed their anti-ship Wunderwaffe until the entire Royal Navy laid at the bottom of the sea. At which point nothing would stop the Imperial Army from landing conventional troops on Albion, and it would all be over.

Securing a diplomatic end to the war would, by all rights, be the correct course of action at this stage. Yes, it would be humiliating and herald a general weakening of the Commonwealth across the globe, most likely with the King of Kemet leading the movement among their colonies, but that was preferable to a foreign army occupying Londinium and dictating terms at the end of a gun.

Unfortunately, there was still the Not-Man and his mysterious 'Adversary' to deal with. Lergen's March on Remula had proven beyond reasonable doubt that the Colonel was more than he appeared, the Congregation's schemes combined with Degurechaff's exhaustion following her deployment in Bovariastadt forcing him to take center stage once again. The Round Table hadn't missed the fact that every time Lergen had taken direct action had been preceded by some event involving the child-looking supersoldier : first in Arene, then when they'd countered their Elder attack on Londinium, and finally the Battle of Bovariastadt. Once was happenstance, twice was coincidence, thrice was clearly the work of an ancient, immortal, body-hopping sorcerer plotting world domination.

As long as the Not-Man was able to continue his work, peace wasn't acceptable. It wasn't just about Albion's global supremacy, the Round Table had already tacitly given up on that; it was about the survival of Mankind as a species free from the tyranny of an immortal warlock and his hordes of monsters.

"Lergen is still in Ildoa, isn't he ?" said Merlin hesitantly. "Monitoring Division Y's efforts in the Holy See and dealing with the locals ?"

"Yes," confirmed Agravain, before frowning. "You aren't suggesting …"

"I am," said the Royal Mage gravelly. "A concentrated strike, using every asset we can muster. The Ancient Kemetians and the knights of a thousand years ago managed to defeat the Not-Man, so it stands to reason that we too can do it with sufficient firepower. The problem will be the supersoldiers around him, but if we focus on killing his current incarnation to the exclusion of all else …"

"It would cost us a lot, and not just in terms of military troops we would have to sacrifice," said Mordred. "The hit to our reputation would be substantial. Lergen is considered a hero in the Empire after his latest stunt : our position at the negotiating table would be damaged, badly."

"I will take personal responsibility for it," offered Merlin. "If we share our theory with the Empire, then whether they believe us or not (and they probably won't), then offering them my head in compensation should let them save face. They want the war to end, after all : their own vaunted rationality should keep them from continuing the war just to avenge a Colonel

for whose death they already got the one responsible. Especially if we offer to either stay neutral or outright join them against the Federation, should our fears of them developing their own Elder magic program turn out to be founded."

There was a moment of silence as the other members of the Round Table considered the idea.

"Are you sure about this ?" asked Agravain eventually.

"I am an old man," replied Merlin with a smile. "If I can serve my country one last time by helping take out a millennial threat, then I will die happy."

"Then before we decide anything, let us consider the practicalities of such a course of action," Kay cut in. "And even if we decide it can be done, I think we should still ask Churbull for his approval."

"Should we, really ?" asked Mordred.

"What do you mean ?"

"Assuming we go through with this and succeed, then I would argue that giving the Prime Minister plausible deniability would be for the best. If he can truthfully claim this was done without his authorization, then the Empire will be much easier to appease."

Again, there was a moment of silence. In the end, for all their faults and flaws, the members of the Round Table were truly dedicated to their country, and were ready to sacrifice their careers, lives and honor (in order of growing importance) for that. They all nodded solemnly to one another.

"Then," declared Mordred, "let us consider how we might kill Eric von Lergen."

---

*"Although it was touch-and-go on several occasions, Subject Totenkopf is now stable following the reveal of the full extent of his injuries and his current condition. As was expected, the discovery that he's been reduced to a decapitated head floating in a tank was severely traumatic. Were he able to do so, it is clear he'd have ended his own life, and he begged to be terminated for hours before we were able to calm him down. Key to this was sharing the Director's instructions that, upon the end of the Great War, if he still desire to be euthanised, his request shall be granted.*

*The construction of the Zertrümmerer array has begun, using the flesh-metal interface which Professor Gehrman designed for Projekt P to connect to Subject Totenkopf's spinal column. Although Subject Totenkopf demonstrated magical capabilities, it will be the first time such a large portion of the subject's body is replaced. While the long-term survival of Subject Totenkopf is doubtful, we should at the very least learn plenty on life-support mechanisms for medical use in the future."*

Memo sent to the Director of Division Y, January 24th, 1926.

---

*January 25th, 1926 – The Unified States*

Sat in his office, the President of the Unified States looked down at the missive which had been sent by the Imperial embassy this afternoon without really seeing it. He'd read it over so many times, the words were burned into his memory.

What a time to be alive, he thought. He'd known his life wouldn't be boring when he'd sworn his oaths of office, but this far surpassed his wildest expectations.

Due to the country being built upon immigration, there was a strong Ildoan minority in the States, and they hadn't taken recent events particularly well. The devastation of the Holy See had predictably caused calls for the Unified States to sally forth in order to punish the wicked Imperials, but mercifully such voices had been in the minority, outnumbered by those who were quite reasonably worried about it happening again in their own cities. The fact that the Ildoan King had so quickly spoken up about the conspiracy that had seized the Holy See and the top ranks of his Kingdom's military had helped as well.

The news of the Francois Eikons being capable of bending the minds of others had also spread, though details were scarce, leading to a profusion of speculation. Thanks to a discreet briefing from the Imperial ambassador, the President knew more about the whole affair, and it hadn't exactly helped him sleep at night. The members of Research Group 51 hadn't seemed to be influenced by anything like it when he had visited, and given the importance of their work he'd plenty of people keeping watch, but would they even realize if the same thing happened to them ?

At least Teslus hadn't suggested they join the Crusade against the Empire when it had been declared and the President had called him to ask about the Ildoan superweapon which had opened a path through the Alps. The arcane scientist had sounded very curious about the mechanics of such a weapon, but hadn't had any theory to offer that was compatible with the fact the Empire had later claimed to have disabled it without laying waste to most of Europa in the resulting detonation.

And if that wasn't enough to worry about, now this. The Russy Federation had successfully stolen the notes from which the Wunderwaffe which had broken the Dacian Army so completely had been created. The thought of the Reds with such army-destroying weapons at their disposal was utterly terrifying. Few of the survivors of the civil war had fled to the Unified States, but enough of them had for the President to know it had been fought with a level of brutality rarely seen in this day and age, and if the rumors that made it through the information cordon isolating the Federation from the rest of the world were to be believed, then things had only gotten worse since.

It was bad enough that the President was giving serious consideration to the Imperial proposal in this latest message. The Reich diplomats were canny enough to know that asking for the Unified States' outright support was non-viable, politically speaking. Instead, they'd offered to assuage the concerns of the American population by transferring the task of overseeing the Kingdom of Ildoa to their armed forces, with the Imperial Army focusing its efforts on containing and decontaminating the ruins of the Holy See.

With the Ildoan Army in shambles after their crushing defeat at Bovariastadt, the Kingdom of Ildoa needed help maintaining public order. Many of the surviving Ildoan soldiers had returned to their barracks at the call of the King, but others had deserted, and while most of those had simply taken off their uniforms and gone home, enough had turned to banditry to pose a real problem to the country's security. The President was confident his nation's armed forces could deal with that, and in the process, position themselves somewhere they could do some good if (or, most likely, when) the situation in the East went wrong.

And of course, deploying the regular Army would be the perfect cover to send the new superweapons of Research Group 51 as well, just in case. It was a risky move : if the best case scenario (which, to their credit, the Imperials had said could very well happen) where the Federation failed to make any use of the data they'd stolen, then he would've risked exposing his nation's superweapon program to the Empire while gaining nothing in return.

Then again, what was the point in investing millions of dollars into researching and building superweapons if they weren't going to use them to safeguard the interests of the country and its people ? And even if the Imperials learned about it, well, the mere fact of their existence could still serve as deterrence to the overly ambitious in the Reich.

Yes, decided the President. He was going to call in the Generals and ask for their advice, then, unless they convinced him it was a bad idea for reasons he hadn't considered yet (after all, he was just one man, and there were things he simply didn't know about), he'd call Teslus and tell him to prepare to move.

Besides, once the superweapons were in Ildoa, there would be nothing preventing them from going North instead of East if the situation changed. The President had no intention of declaring war on the Empire and starting an apocalyptic conflict between the creations of Division Y and those of Research Group 51, but keeping your options open was a trick every successful politician learned early.

---

*February 4th, 1926 – Russy Federation Capital Moskva*

The building was nondescript. It wasn't too recent nor too old, and there were dozens of others like it in Moskva. Yet anyone spending a few hours watching passer-bys would have realized there was something off about it. People tried very hard not to look at it, and those who did immediately looked elsewhere, while sending furtive, scared looks around to see if anyone had noticed them looking at it.

It wasn't the only building in the glorious capital of the Russy Federation where the people who went in didn't always come back out, far from it, but anyone who had survived the last few years in this city knew it was best to just pretend the building didn't exist.

In a room inside that building, the woman who went by the name of Natasha sat, a pitcher of water and a few leftover breadcrumbs on the table in front of her. Her journey back from the Empire had been difficult, and it showed in the one-way mirror that occupied most of one wall. Her clothes were tattered, her skin dirty and scratched, her face was gaunt with exhaustion and hunger, and there was a wild look in her eyes, all of which combined to make her look more like a vagrant than one of the Federation's top operatives.

Escaping the Empire after she'd shot the Albish agent had been a challenge. Imperial Intelligence had been in an uproar, scouring the country for her and what she carried. Several times, she'd been certain her discovery was imminent, only for random chance to give her a way out. Even so, she'd had to walk through kilometers of countryside on foot in the middle of winter.

The door to the room opened, and a man Natasha had met several times before, but whose name she had never been told (not that she'd ever asked, she knew better than that) entered. She put down the cup of water she'd been holding and stood up.

"Comrade Natasha," he greeted her. "It pleases us to see you returned to the Motherland."

"Comrade Overseer," she greeted him back. "I am pleased to be home also."

They sat, and the man placed a sheaf of paperwork in front of him, before taking a pen out of a pocket. Every motion was smooth and deliberate, speaking of a routine he'd practiced a thousand times and more.

"Your mission was successful, I take it ?"

"Yes. I located the headquarters of the Imperial dogs' superweapons division, and managed to infiltrate them before escaping."

She took out an annotated map containing the location of Castle Schwartzstein and handed it over.

"Impressive. We'll do a full debriefing of what you saw there later. In the meantime, did you succeed in your other objective ?"

"Yes, Comrade."

Slowly, carefully, she unwrapped the grimoire she'd carried across half of Europa. Despite the damage the rest of her possessions had suffered, it was completely untouched. For one brief moment, she felt the irrational impulse to keep the book close to her, but she suppressed it and laid the tome on the table between her and her handler.

"I do not know what is inside this book," Natasha said, "but the Imperials kept it locked and chained in one of their castle's room, and they were very determined to recover it."

"You have done a great service to the people, Comrade Natasha," the overseer congratulated her in a voice as cold and lifeless as the northern plains. "Your devotion to the Motherland will not be forgotten. For now, I think you deserve some proper rest."

Oh yes. She wanted to sleep for an entire week, once she'd gotten some actual warm food in her belly. And perhaps, now that she didn't have to carry that tome any longer, the nightmares that had haunted her every stolen moment of sleep since she'd escaped Castle Schwartzstein would leave her in peace. The nightmares hadn't been about her killing Christopher : it would've been easier if they had. It hadn't been the first time she'd killed a man she'd been intimate with, nor, most likely, would it be the last.

No, instead those nightmares had been filled with fanged mouths, yellow eyes, and the bleating of goats, along with the feeling of running away from something while knowing with bone-deep certainty it could catch her at anytime it so chose and was merely toying with her. It was all probably due to her stress at being on the run from the Empire and what she'd seen in Castle Schwartzstein : now that she was back in the safety of the Motherland, it would all fade away.

Several hours later, in the room provided to her by her human masters, Natasha learned that she had been overly optimistic, as the nightmares returned in full – and this time, the shapeless pursuer didn't bother toying with her.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Oh, hello Laurence. Doing better here than in Yharnam, I see. And I'm sure Natasha's dreams are nothing to worry about.

Fun fact : the next chapter was going to be something people have asked for some time : a breather/slice-of-life episode. We were going to check in on various characters while there was something of a time skip on global events as things progressed in the Federation.

Or at least that was the plan until that old bastard Merlin came up with the idea of assassinating Lergen as a prelude to serious peace talks with the Empire. I hadn't planned for that, but it made sense when I wrote it and now I am stuck with it. The Muse, as ever, is capricious and not to be denied.

If you have suggestions regarding how the Allied Kingdom might try to kill Lergen while he's in Remula, feel free to post them. That plot development caught me completely by surprise, so I don't have ANYTHING prepared for it. Same thing for the slice-of-life one after : I have a list of scenes prepared, but please tell me who you want to check on before we return to our regularly scheduled eldritch horror.

And yes, Being K is Not!Shub-Niggurath. Of course, there will be some adjustments from the Cthulhu Mythos, but that's the general gist of the entity.

I wonder if anyone will catch the reference in poor Agent 404's section. And as always, I look forward to your thoughts, comments, ideas and theories.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Colonel William Drake,*

*Your services are required for a mission of extreme importance to not just the Allied Kingdom, but the entire Europan continent, perhaps even the world should our worst theories be correct.*

*Our intelligence services have identified the man responsible for the creation of Division Y, and the unleashing upon the world of the Wunderwaffen and all the death and destruction they have caused. The man in question is none other than the one who led the troops which crippled your uncle at the Rhine, Eric von Lergen.*

*As you are no doubt aware, Colonel Lergen is presently leading the Imperial forces in Ildoa, having invaded the Kingdom and razed the Holy See to the ground. While the details of what exactly happened at the Holy See are still under investigation, Lergen's continued presence away from Imperial territory, and with comparatively little protection, presents us with an opportunity unlikely to repeat itself.*

*Your sole mission is to eliminate Colonel Lergen. Everything else, up to the survival of your unit, is secondary to that objective. We have reason to believe that this man is more than he appears, and poses a threat to the long-term existence of the Allied Kingdom itself.*

*Because of this, and the presence of numerous Wunderwaffen in Remula, your unit will be accompanied by a group of magic-capable experts, led by the Royal Wizard himself. They, too, are expendable to the mission's fulfillment, something which you can be assured the Royal Wizard is fully aware and approving of. He will explain the situation in more details during your journey to Ildoa. Although what he will tell you may appear fantastical, I urge you to treat it seriously, lest you and your men meet the same fate as your uncle's own unit.*

*I trust I need not tell you how strategically important and diplomatically sensitive this entire matter is. I assure you that we're fully aware of it as well, yet believe that this mission is of paramount importance regardless.*

*May God be with you."*

Excerpt from a confidential letter addressed to Colonel William Drake of the Albish Aerial Mage Corps (Named 'Lancelot'), 4th February 1926.

---

*"The Americans have accepted the Empire's proposal, and they have sent a task force to assume peacekeeping duties in Ildoa. They are sending over fifty thousand soldiers, and a lot of equipment our agents weren't able to identify. My best guess is that the Americans have*

*been working on their own superweapons since the Wunderwaffen's reveal, and they are bringing their prototypes along.*

*I doubt whatever they managed to cobble together in less than two years is anything us or the Empire need to worry about, but that isn't the main issue. The convoy is supposed to arrive in three days : their President has pushed for things to get ready quick, and their army was making preparations since the start of the War just in case public opinion changed or something forced their hand.*

*Once the Americans are in Ildoa, Lergen might leave, and even if he doesn't, making a move will be diplomatically disastrous – the last thing we need at this stage is for the States to join the War on the other side. We need to move before their arrival if at all possible."*

*"Understood. We strike tomorrow. For King and country."*

Private communication between Agravain and Merlin, members of Albion's Round Table, February 8th, 1926.

---

*"There have long been rumors regarding what laid beneath the surface of the Holy See. During the days of the Inquisition, its agents scoured Europa in droves, burning any magic user they encountered without the political support needed to avoid accusations of witchcraft and heresy, but while their lore was often lost with them, stories abound of grimoires and artefacts being carried back to the Holy See. However, the secrecy of the Church made proving this difficult.*

*Those rumors have now been confirmed. Our investigation into the ruins of the Holy See has uncovered the existence of a vast network of tunnels, many of which collapsed as a result of the battle against the Congregation's Ivory Blasphemy. Within, we found traces of magical wards carved in the walls, which we believe were the reason the Congregation was able to work without tripping every alarm in the Kingdom of Ildoa. As was detected before in the Francois Republic, the lingering aura of the Eikons also suffuses most of the tunnels (though it can only be detected at a certain depth, as anything closer to the surface was contaminated with the aura of the Ivory Blasphemy).*

*We've also found the remnants of what we believe (thanks to the testimony of the Lunarchs sent from the Division's headquarters) to be the laboratory of Doctor Schugel, where he performed the arcane operations which made the Congregation's Eikons superior to those of the Republic. While most of the notes we recovered were ineligible due to the madness of their author, some of it might grant us insight into the nature of Being X, and they've been sent home for further analysis.*

*Entire chambers full of ash were also discovered. Our current theory is that those were repositories of ancient lore until recently, whose contents were destroyed by the Congregation as Being X's hold on the minds of its members drove them to fanaticism. Given the use the Division could have made of such lore, it might also have been a deliberate attempt to deny the Reich any advantage possible following the Crusade's defeat at Bovariastadt.*

*While the vast majority of the Holy See's inhabitants either died during the battle or fled and were detained, some of them remained behind. Unfortunately, all of them were caught in the Blasphemy's indoctrination aura before its destruction, and whether due to its sheer power or the circumstances of its summoning, the effects of it were even more pronounced.*

*These Wretches, as the soldiers accompanying us call them, have completely lost their minds to Being X's unholy light, beyond the indoctrination observed on the people of Bovariastadt before the defeat of the Counterfeit Saint by the Director. They do not appear to be self-aware, reduced to mere animals full of hate and anguish, lashing out at anyone they encounter who isn't one of their own with extreme violence and feeding on the provisions packed in the tunnels for the Congregation's use. All of them are blind, their eyes having either melted in their sockets or having been bloodily torn out by their own hands, but their other senses seem to have improved to compensate. Attempts to reason or heal those we managed to capture were met with complete failure, which combined with the loss of several troopers and a pair of occultists to an unexpected ambush has led us to adopt a kill-on-sight policy. Fortunately, none of them appear to possess any supernatural ability, with their surprising strength being instead attributed to their insanity.*

*At the moment, we are unsure how many Wretches remain within the tunnels : the largest group of them we encountered numbered over twenty. We will continue our efforts to map what remains of the entire complex and cleanse it of this last pathetic and bitter gift of the Congregation."*

Excerpt from the report of the Division Y team tasked with investigating the remains of the Holy See, February 6th, 1926.

---

*February 9th, 1926 – Remula – Imperial Exclusion Zone*

Colonel Eric von Lergen took a sip of his coffee, savoring the deep flavor of the Ildoan grains that had been used to make it. As much as the Empire was a primarily coffee-drinking nation, he wasn't enough of a patriot not to admit that the beverage's average quality was much higher this side of the border.

Although admittedly, he would have drunk even the swill they served at Headquarters gratefully right now. The month since the razing of the Holy See had been the busiest of his entire life, and only moderately less stressful than the days of desperate advance that had preceded it. Between coordinating the investigation of the Holy See ruins, ensuring the quarantine was maintained in both directions despite the countless curious idiots trying to get in, maintaining the fragile peace between Imperials and Ildoans, and reporting back to the Fatherland, he barely had time to sleep.

His duties had taken him all around the Ildoan capital, always under heavy escort. As the man who had led the strike force, commanded the troops involved in the destruction of the Holy See, and accepted the surrender of the Ildoan King, his name and face were now known across the globe. And while the bulk of the Ildoan population had either accepted their defeat or were still reeling from the sheer shock of how fast the Crusade had been declared and defeated, it would only take one crazed gunman to kill Lergen, who lacked the ability to

project a personal magic shield or regenerate from all but the most immediately fatal of injuries.

It was one of the things about the Wunderwaffen that worried him, when he laid in bed at night trying and failing to sleep. The supersoldiers of Division Y each possessed considerable power, yet they were beholden to mere mortals like himself. It was the same potential issue he'd foreseen among aerial mages. Before the advent of the computation orb, a single individual soldier's combat potential had been limited. But now, even a single platoon of mages could raze a small city to the ground.

The discipline of the Imperial Army had kept any desertions from happening among the mage corps, and from what Lergen understood the supersoldiers were too in awe of Degurechaff to even think of rebelling against her authority, but … it still disturbed him. As this new form of warfare became more and more common, ensuring the loyalty and obedience of soldiers would become more and more important, and the methods by which this was achieved would also need to evolve. After all, it wasn't as if one could simply have a misbehaving Werwolf lashed.

The Colonel was trying to put those thoughts aside and focus on his coffee when the alarms suddenly started to ring. For a single heartbeat, he remained immobile, then put his mug down with a sigh and walked to the radio operator.

"What is going on ?"

Lergen's blood ran cold as he listened to the operator's hurried (but not panicked, the part of him that was still a Personnel officer noted) report. Multiple magical signatures had just appeared on the detection array and were approaching from the west. Most of them were unknown, but a handful had been identified as belonging to Albish aerial mages who had been observed across the Dodobird Strait, where Imperial and Albish mages had spent the last few months staring at one another and daring each other to make the first move.

"The 'Lancelot' and his wing, someone with a lot of mana, a bunch of extras grouped together, among whom … oh. What a surprise," he muttered to himself as he recognized one of the names, whose magical signature had been recorded on the Southern Continent several months ago.

The Colonel couldn't believe the Albish were stupid enough to attack here, in another country that had already surrendered to the Reich and whose declaration of war had been spurious in the first place. He supposed he should be glad that their counter-intelligence efforts to make him seem like the head of Division Y instead of Degurechaff were working : it didn't take a genius to guess that he was the most likely target of this task force. It seemed having their Navy humiliated hadn't been enough to convince the Albish that all of Operation Enigma had been a deception.

"Initiate defensive protocol Delta," he told his aides. "Everyone ready for aerial mage attack. Be on the lookout for the anti-Mythos wards we encountered during Operation Enigma."

With the order given, he began to move out of the room, down the stairs, and into the secondary command center. They hadn't been idle since their arrival in Remula. As the

battlefield between two factions wielding Mythos Magic, the remnants of the Holy See were a site of interest to every great power, and nobody who had worked under Degurechaff was the type to take chances.

The basement of the hotel in which they had installed their headquarters had been converted into a bunker and command center that wouldn't have been out of place on the Rhine Front, and every building in the vicinity emptied of those few Ildoans who didn't have the good sense to run away when the horned giants had rushed in to fight the Ivory Blasphemy (as the creature the Congregation had summoned was nicknamed in the city).

More aerial mages had been dispatched to help keep the peace across Ildoa : apparently, General Zettour had decided now was the perfect opportunity to test another of Degurechaff's idea. Using aerial mages as a highly-mobile response force operating independently instead of suborning them to a more conventional unit was, admittedly, somewhat mundane compared to the rest of the Major's 'innovations', but it had still proven very useful. Who knew : in another life, one where Division Y had never taken off, maybe that idea alone could have been the pivot around which the Reich's entire military doctrine shifted.

Here and now, however, it was one more tool in the Empire's arsenal. Lergen was fortunate that the aerial mages were ready for deployment at the moment, but with Headquarters worried about the threat in the East, the devastation of the Southern Army, and the casualties the Northern and Western Armies' own mage corps had suffered during the War, the number of mages available for peacekeeping duties had been limited. He only had a score of them stationed in Remula at the moment, none of whom were trained to the standards of Division Y. Technically, he did have six of the latter ready, but they were needed at the Holy See perimeter to help the three Hünen enforcing the quarantine. And he couldn't move the giants from their position, either : the last thing he wanted was for the Albish to fuck things up again and let loose a tide of Wretches in the middle of Remula. Even if they didn't try to break the containment, he couldn't move the Hünen to assist unless it was in extremis : the diplomatic situation was already tense enough as it was without the giants battling inside Remula once again.

But however good he knew the Imperial mages under his command were, two-to-one odds weren't anything he cared to bet on. The nearest squadrons had already been recalled, but it would take them time to get here even going at full speed – time that they didn't have. The Albish had planned their attack well : Lergen didn't doubt for a moment they had agents in the city who had watched his movements and warned their comrades that now was as good a time to strike as they were going to get.

From a purely tactical perspective, disregarding the strategic and diplomatic consequences, this attack had clearly been well-planned. Unfortunately for the Albish, Lergen hadn't spent so long working alongside Division Y without picking up their habit for seemingly-overkill contingencies.

"Captain Weiss," he called out briskly over the radio even as he moved toward the bunker, "gather the occultists in the ruins and have them perform the ritual of Correspondence, then explain to our visitors that they need a visa to come here."

*"Yes, sir,"* came the reply. *"I'm on my way now."*

He didn't need to tell the Captain to be quick about it. By now, Lergen doubted the Albish were expecting anything but the fight of their lives when tangling with Division Y : it wouldn't do to disappoint them.

---

*February 9th, 1926 – Skies of the Kingdom of Ildoa*

To Colonel William Drake, bearer of the Name 'Lancelot', flying had always been a great joy. Nothing compared to the experience of moving through the air under one's own power, at speeds far beyond anything the human body could hope to achieve on its own.

Even during his stint above the Dodobird Strait, where he had earned his Name in a number of skirmishes with the Imperial mages, there'd always been an edge of simple, childish joy to go along the adrenaline of battle and the deep, barely-suppressed dread that today would be the day he met one of the Reich's mage-killers. Sure, Albish Intelligence claimed they could only be deployed at night, which was why no aerial mage ever sortied past the sunset, but the spooks hadn't exactly covered themselves in glory in the War, what with them having completely missed any hint of the Wunderwaffen until Dacia's ill-fated invasion attempt.

Right now, however, as he flew above the Kingdom of Ildoa toward its capital, his joy utterly failed to penetrate his nervousness. The briefing he and his men had received on the boat trip that had brought them to the West coast of Ildoa had been … disconcerting. Even now, he wasn't sure whether he believed the Royal Wizard's claims.

The fact that the Wunderwaffen existed at all, and the various events which had occurred since their reveal, had admittedly forced him to reconsider his former definition of the word 'impossible'. But the notion of some ancient, body-hopping wizard who returned every few centuries to try to conquer the world with an army of monsters still sounded fanciful at best. Had it come from anyone but one of the Allied Kingdom's most respected men and its foremost expert in all things magical, he would've dismissed the whole idea out of hand as the paranoid ramblings of someone trying to make sense of something about which he didn't have the first clue, regardless of how many mental hoops he needed to jump through in the process.

Still, he was a Drake. His family had served the Allied Kingdom for centuries, and he wasn't about to be the first in generations to fail in the prosecution of his duties. Even if the Royal Wizard was wrong, if this man – this Colonel Eric von Lergen – was only what he appeared to be, he was still a valid and valuable military target in his own right.

And, William quietly admitted to himself, he was also the man who'd given the order that'd left his beloved uncle crippled beyond the help of even the Allied Kingdom's most advanced healing magic. He had been taught too well to let vengeance affect his reasoning, but he couldn't deny the part of him that wanted it all the same.

"Here they come !" he called out as multiple mana signatures suddenly appeared, rising above the city to meet them. He felt the mana of his own men surge as they activated their various boosting spells – and then, with the speed that was typical of combat between aerial mages, they were all fighting for their lives.

Unlike the rest of the Albish mages, the Royal Wizard didn't carry a computation orb, but a pair of what, to Drake's inexpert eyes, looked like ornate, gilded sticks. Apparently those were Ancient Kemetian relics, recovered from the Southern Continent before the whole mess which had required the Imperial Army's intervention and led to a rather severe loss of face for Albion. His apprentices carried a variety of holy relics, along with more modern computation orbs.

The Imperial mages were tough bastards, veterans from the Great War and carrying Imperial computation orbs, which despite the best efforts of the Allied Kingdom's arcano-engineering teams remained more advanced than anything else on the planet. Drake had trained his people as hard as he could, but training wasn't the same as battlefield experience. Still, quantity had a quality all its own, and eventually the last Imperial mage went down. By that point, Drake's battalion had been cut to a third of its initial size, and only a handful of the casualties would live to see the next day if they got medical attention soon.

Luckily, both sides hadn't wanted to risk getting the Remulan civilians caught in the cross-fire, so the fight had been limited to the airspace directly above the evacuated district surrounding the Holy See. Even more fortunately, the horned metal giants who'd punched through the Ildoan Army like it was made of wet paper and killed the unholy monstrosity that had left the area in ruin hadn't gotten involved either, though Drake didn't doubt they would've if any of his mages had even looked like they were going to try to breach the invisible cordon.

Of course, that begged the question of why the Imperial Wunderwaffen weren't joining the fight even as their comrades were fighting to the death. Limiting collateral damage might be the reason, but Drake couldn't help but think there was another, more disturbing explanation.

Then, suddenly, it was as if a new sun had risen above the Eternal City. It took Drake a few heartbeats to realize he wasn't seeing it with his eyes but with his magical senses. Atop the ruins of the Holy See, a figure was flying, blazing with power. Never before had Drake encountered anything so powerful.

He knew what this was, of course. He'd been briefed about the super-mage the Imperials had deployed during the Defense of Kheriaha. But it was one thing to hear about the existence of a man who had fought the master of the Nameless City one-on-one and emerged victorious, and another entirely to feel his power yourself.

The super-mage flew straight at the largest group of Drake's men. Their attack spells scattered pitifully against his shield, which absorbed enough firepower to level a fortress as if it were a light rain. Then he was among them, and within the blink of an eye four of Drake's comrades were nothing more than charred pieces of meat falling to the ground below.

"Now !" shouted the Royal Wizard.

In the short time it'd taken the super-mage to slaughter a whole flight, five of Merlin's apprentices flew around the Imperial champion, and, in a display of coordination that left Drake reluctantly impressed, activated a singular spell. A solid sphere of golden light three meters across popped into existence right around the Imperial mage, blocking him from view.

There was a tense pause, then a booming sound as something banged against the inside of the sphere, once, twice, thrice. The sphere shuddered with every blow, cracks spreading from the point of impact before filling back in. Drake could see the apprentices' tension and sense their mana spike with every blow. This was a containment spell, which Merlin had described to Drake and his men on the way to Ildoa as being derived from some of the Ancient Kemetian relics the Royal Wizard had rescued from the hands of private collectors during Albion's Kemetian craze of a few decades back.

"How long can they hold him ?" asked Drake.

"Hopefully long enough, but we didn't have any opportunities to test this before today," replied Merlin darkly. "So we shouldn't tarry, Colonel."

Drake's remaining men stayed behind to protect the apprentices from interference by any remaining Imperial forces, leaving the Colonel alone with the Royal Wizard and his last free student, a young woman with a face set in stone – Niniane, she'd named herself during the trip.

They moved immediately, toward the building which their spies had told them was the headquarters of the Imperial presence in Remula. At Merlin's signal, the mages opened fire with attack spells, and within seconds, nothing was left of the building but rubble, a reminder that, for all that the Wunderwaffen had taken center stage in the Great War, aerial mages wielded awe-inspiring power of their own.

"No," muttered the Royal Wizard, frowning. "It would be too easy. He isn't dead yet."

Drake had to agree : after everything that had happened, it would be somewhat anti-climactic if the great mastermind of Division Y perished so easily. Of course, he was well aware that war wasn't a story, and even the life of the most esteemed warrior could end suddenly and randomly – but in this case, he wouldn't believe Lergen was dead until he'd seen the body with his own eyes.

They looked, and there, amidst the ruins, Drake saw a heavy metal door. He flew down, covered by Merlin and Niniane, and with a burst of reinforcement magic pulled it open.

"Let's go," said the Royal Wizard, and they went into the dark tunnel, senses boosted and shields deployed. Drake didn't think the Imperials would risk booby-trapping the path to their command bunker – there hadn't been enough time to set up explosives since they had started the attack, and he doubted they would have risked setting them up beforehand in what had been a civilian building – but better safe than sorry.

Soon, they reached a large space that had probably been a wine cellar of some kind, but had since been repurposed as a bunker and command center for the Imperial forces. Men with strange rifles, like those his uncle had described to him and which had punched through his shield and crippled him, stood with their weapons at the ready, but it was difficult to focus on them when five hideous, giant monstrosities filled almost the entire space of the bunker.

The Devils of the Rhine were far more terrifying in person than in the recordings Drake had been granted access to, though only two of the horrors present were of the same breed as the

ones which had first been deployed against the Republic : the others were a mix of various but equally nightmarish shapes that, combined with the fact they were underground, made him think he'd just accidentally stepped into Hell. The sight of them actually froze Drake in place, though the fact it did the same to the rest of the party, including the Royal Wizard, was some slight balm to his honor.

And amidst it all stood one man in the uniform of an Imperial Colonel, looking utterly unperturbed by the inhuman monsters around him. Drake recognized him from the briefing's photographs : this was Eric von Lergen, the mastermind of Division Y and, according to the Royal Wizard, the single greatest threat to Albion.

The two of them were of the same rank. William also had the advantage of being an aerial mage, where Lergen was someone who had spent most of his career behind a desk. And yet, looking at how calm the other man was – if anything, he seemed annoyed at the whole situation – William couldn't help but take Merlin's theory more seriously than before.

"Hello, gentlemen and miss," Lergen called out in slightly accented Albish. The sheer absurdity of him speaking as they faced each other gave them pause, briefly preventing the situation from turning into a brutal, close-quarters fight (one that, for all his training and faith in the Royal Wizard's preparations, Drake wasn't in any hurry to start).

"I am honored that Albion would send someone as important as you, Sir Royal Wizard," he said to Merlin, who stiffened almost imperceptibly – not that Lergen missed it. "Oh, come on. of course I recognize you. Our spy networks might not be as widely spread as yours, what with us not having any interest in fostering chaos and distrust across the globe in order to prop up a colonial empire, but we do keep track of people in important, official positions."

Merlin didn't answer, merely continuing to glare at the Imperial Colonel, who shrugged before turning his gaze on Drake (who very determinedly did not flinch) :

"And you … you remind me of someone, 'Lancelot'." He snapped his fingers. "Right, I remember now. You wouldn't happen to be related to the last idiot with a death wish Albion sent after me, would you ?"

"That was my uncle," Drake hissed, while half the Imperial soldiers chuckled, and the Devils made a noise like a man drowning in his own blood.

"Was it ? You should have learned from his mistake, then. But then, learning from your failures is something the Albish aren't particularly good at." His bespectacled gaze moved to one of Merlin's assistants. "Isn't that so, Miss Niniane ? You of all people should know better than to take part in this folly."

"We all have our duties, Colonel, and mine demands that I be here now," replied the young woman he'd been addressing.

"Duty …" Lergen sighed. "I suppose so. Still, it is a shame that your masters are so willing to spit in the face of our offers of a peaceful resolution for this conflict between our nations like this. What do you even think you're going to accomplish here, anyway ? Besides reminding

the entire world that you are willing to launch attacks in the middle of the capital of a country with which you aren't at war ?"

"Enough playing around, fiend," snarled the Royal Wizard, cutting through the awkward silence that had followed the Imperial Colonel's accusation. "Your wicked words won't deceive us. Show us your true face, before we end you."

The Imperial Colonel blinked, seeming genuinely off-balance for the first time.

"… I am sorry, what ?"

"Don't try to hide it !" Merlin all but spat. "We know the truth of it now. You tried to hide your tracks by wiping out the remnants of your work in Kemet, but it didn't work !"

"My – you know exactly what we did in Kemet !" Lergen protested. "It was your country that unleashed the Fiends of the Nameless City, we were just on the Southern Continent for the Suan Canal !"

"Oh, I'm sure that is what your 'superiors' thought," sneered the Royal Wizard. "And it was my apprentice's actions who led to the unleashing of the Fiends, yes. But you knew about the Nameless City from the start. Why else would you accompany the task force yourself, instead of entrusting it to one of your minions ? I will tell you ! Because you knew that someone might find proof of your previous incarnation's involvement in the Nameless City, which could expose your masquerade to your Imperial dupes !"

"My 'previous incarnation' ?! What the hell are you talking about ?!" asked Lergen, flabbergasted. The Imperial soldiers were glancing at each other, clearly as confused as their commanding officer.

What followed was equal parts terrifying and embarrassing. For almost a straight minute, Merlin ranted (ranted, that really was the only word for it), proclaiming the theory he had shared with Drake and his men as if it were fact. He named Lergen the Not-Man, the ancient, body-hopping warlock of old, who had been reborn again and again in order to create monsters, only for his creations to be defeated, his incarnation slain, and all traces of his works wiped away by the good men who ever opposed him. How Lergen had created Division Y, using others to do his dirty work for him while he stayed in the shadows until events had forced his hands; how he had come to Remula to defeat the power which had enslaved the Holy See in order to remove a competitor to his throne of dominion.

When Merlin was done, Lergen simply stared at him. There was a moment of complete silence, broken only by the distant sounds of the ongoing battle above. Lergen opened his mouth, then closed it. From what Drake saw in the corner of his field of view, the Imperial troopers looked just as confused as their commander (if the Devils were confused, their faces were too inhuman for him to tell).

"You are insane," said Lergen at last, before looking Drake straight in the eyes. "Come on, Colonel Drake, surely you cannot believe this nonsense ? This old man clearly has lost his senses – which if he's the one who handled Elder Magic research for your side, then I guess is understandable, but –"

"Silence !" roared Merlin, raising the Ancient Kemetian relics in both hands, each suddenly blazing with power. "Your forked tongue will not avail you any longer, serpent ! By the power I wield and the sacred secrets I have gleaned from your old enemies, I shall defeat you once more !"

A castigation spell erupted from the Royal Wizard, bathing the entire chamber in its golden glow. The eldritch guns of the Imperial troopers fizzled and crackled, while the Devils shrieked as they fell to the ground, twitching in agony. Yet Lergen still stood, utterly unaffected by the Royal Wizard's spell.

"No," whispered Merlin, pale-faced and horrified at the sight of their quarry resisting his magical assault. "No, it cannot be ! We cannot be too late ! I cannot fail ! I WILL NOT FAIL !"

Again, the Kemetian relics blazed, power gathering within them. Drake felt it spike right past the level of the castigation spell, past that of any attack spell he had ever sensed. For a single heartbeat, he didn't understand what was happening, then cold realization dawned on him.

Merlin was going to kill them all. He was pouring all of his considerable mana into the relics, using them as a prism through which the immense magical energy the Royal Wizard was capable of gathering would be unleashed all at once. In that way, he was hoping to overcome whatever defenses Lergen was using that let him resist the castigation spell. But while that would doubtlessly work, it would also vaporize the entire chamber and everyone in it, shield or no shield. Hell, given how powerful Merlin was, Drake wouldn't be surprised if it took out a good chunk of Remula along with them !

For one agonizing second, Drake hesitated, unsure what he was supposed to do. His orders had been clear. 'Eliminate Eric von Lergen at all costs'. Everyone in the attack team was expendable if it was to achieve that objective, including the Royal Wizard himself. But it was one thing to sacrifice himself and his team to the mission, and another entirely to let civilians be caught in the blast. Yet it wasn't as if there was much he could do, either : the Royal Wizard was so much more powerful than him -

And then Niniane moved, clutching her relic to her chest. Haloed in an aura of her own, one that was the silver of moonlight to Merlin's gold, she walked through the storm of energy surrounding Merlin as if it were not here, before raising her right hand and placing it on her master's balding skull.

Merlin looked at his apprentice, horror and consternation on his face; then he fell down, unconscious, and would have slammed head first into the floor if Niniane hadn't caught him with surprising gentleness.

For one awful moment, as the Kemetian relics hovered in the air and vibrated with power, Drake thought that Niniane's treachery had been for nothing, and they would all die in an apocalyptic blast anyway. Then the two priceless artefacts shattered into pieces which broke even further, until all that remained was a fine, glowing dust which fell onto the concrete floor.

Again, doubt and fear clashed in Drake's mind with his orders to take down Lergen at any cost. Then he saw one of the Devils stand up and stare at him, its body lit with the very fires of Hell, its glare promising only a burning, fiery demise.

He turned and ran, flying through the tunnel at frankly unwise speeds. He told himself the attack was a bust, and his superiors needed to be informed of what had just happened, before the Empire twisted the narrative into whatever truth served their interests best. He told himself there was nothing more he could do down here but die, whether at the claws of the monsters or by the very same weapons which had crippled his uncle.

Drake stopped dead in his tracks as he emerged from the tunnel. There, hovering above the ground and crackling with overflowing power, was the Imperial super mage, who had broken free of the containment spell. Drake could see the apprentices and his men laying around amidst the rubble, dead or unconscious he couldn't say for about half – the other half were very, very clearly dead.

"You would be wise to surrender," said the super mage, his voice cold as ice. "I promise you that you will be treated in accordance with the laws of war, no matter how little regard your country seems to hold for them." Then, he added in a somehow even colder tone : "Division Y can always use more captive mages."

Well, thought Drake as he slowly raised his arms away from his computation orb, fuck.

---

*February 10th, 1926 – The Inner Sea – Unified States Navy convoy*

Nicol Teslus smiled as he breathed in deeply, enjoying the fresh air after so long spent below deck.

The engineers had worked like crazy to get the Titan in a state fit for shipping, and were still working to make it ready for deployment. Teslus himself had been working on the warmachine for what had only felt like a few hours (but had, in fact, been nearly forty) before his assistants had all but bodily dragged him out of the room and told him to clear his head, eat something, wash up and then go to bed.

If he hadn't managed to teach four of the academics the President's people had found for him how to build T-Engines without his help (out of the ten he'd been sent, though at least none of the others had gone mad this time), he would never have been allowed to join this expedition. Which made sense, of course, but it had still chafed him, because it'd reminded him how his entire legacy to Humanity had been hanging on the precarious thread of his own finite, mortal life until then. While not all of Research Group 51's work relied on the arcane technology of the T-Engine, their truly revolutionary inventions did, and the thought that its secrets would be lost with his death had been disheartening to say the least.

The inventor had been required to sit on several meetings where the military officers in command of the expedition had discussed the tactical applications of the Research Group's superweapons. Pretty soon, they had come to the conclusion that they didn't have enough of them to use them as anything but a counter to any superweapons their hypothetical opponent (the Empire was the most likely candidate, but what had happened in Francois, Kemet and

Ildoa proved that they weren't the only ones with Elder Magic) might deploy. Strategy wasn't Teslus' area of expertise, so he'd deferred to them, merely answering their questions regarding the technical specifications of the superweapons and devices Research Group 51 brought to the table.

During the trip, they had run tests on the soldiers to find those with enough magical potential to activate the nightvision googles and trained them in their usage. The officers were almost salivating at the thought of using these to deal with Ildoa's banditry problem : they could hardly have asked for a better testing chance than a bunch of scattered Ildoan deserters with poor discipline preying on civilians. They'd also trained additional pilots for the score of completed suits of power armor they'd brought (along with a bunch of spare parts and tools to make field repairs if needed).

Apparently, there had been some kind of commotion in Remula yesterday, with the Allied Kingdom launching an attack on the Imperial task force and getting their backsides handed to them. The magical detection arrays they had brought with them had picked it off all the way across the sea. Some Albish bigwig had been involved, and the Allied Kingdom was fervently denying having authorized the whole thing, which the Imperials were taking as seriously as one might expect.

It would probably delay the official transfer of peacekeeping duties until things were sorted on the diplomatic front (apparently, following the initial schedule might be interpreted as running away due to the raid, which didn't make sense to Teslus but he wasn't a soldier), but that hadn't slowed the convoy down. If anything, the Ildoans were even more eager to have them here than before, as the general understanding was that the Albish were unlikely to try again if there was a chance the Americans could get caught in the crossfire.

Which was fine by him. For all that Teslus was proud of the work he and his colleagues had done (and hadn't that been a new if not unpleasant experience, to no longer work alone on his projects and have people around him who actually managed to follow him most of the time), he was still a pacifist at heart. The engineer part of him might be disappointed if there wasn't an opportunity to field-test their creations, but the rest of him would take the disappointment over the loss of life any such opportunity would involve.

Although, he reflected with a frown, if the whispers he had heard about the Russy Federation were true, then that opportunity might come whether he wanted it or not. Before departing the Unified States, Teslus had been read in on the communiqués the Empire had sent regarding what had happened in Ildoa, as well as the more confidential claims that an agent from the Federation had stolen Elder Magic research from Division Y's own headquarters – research that, according to the Imperials, was incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands.

The Unified States' Intelligence was divided as to whether the Imperials were simply against anyone else having access to their Wunderwaffen or were sincere in their fear of what the Federation might achieve with such knowledge. Given what Teslus knew had occurred in Russy since the revolution, he could well believe the latter. And, much as he believed that maintaining the balance of power between nations would ultimately help prevent devastating conflict, that theory depended on the nations in question maintaining a certain level of rationality, which wasn't frequent in autocracies.

He could only hope, and do his best to ensure the Unified States was ready to play its part if it came to it. With a firm nod to himself, Teslus left the deck and went to get himself something to eat in the mess before going to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

AN : By now, I think it's been established that Lergen responds to mind-numbing terror and fear for his life by becoming extremely sassy. Which wasn't something I planned for, it just happened, and since I think it's funny, I kept it in.

You may have noticed that Teslus is surprisingly chill about the whole 'clash of superweapons in a battle for the fate of the world' thing. That is very much intentional, and I look forward to your updated theories as to what is going on with him now that we have got a POV from him and he isn't acting like the Congregation and the rest of Being X's indoctrinated thralls.

As promised, the next chapter will be something of a breather episode, made up of slice of life scenes from various characters. Well, after perhaps one or two scenes dealing with the immediate aftermath of the Albish attack, of course. What do you all think will be the reaction of the various international parties to this latest stunt of the Round Table ?

And what could Niniane's sudden turn possibly mean, I wonder. Of course, you all already know why Lergen wasn't affected by Merlin's castigation spell at all.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts, theories and suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*ALBISH LIGHTNING ASSAULT ON REMULA FAILS !*

*Yesterday, the headquarters of the Imperial Army's peace-keeping forces in Ildoa were attacked by a task force of aerial mages from the Allied Kingdom, leading to a brutal battle in the district of Remula surrounding the Holy See. Despite being outnumbered due to having to cover the entire Kingdom of Ildoa, our brave soldiers gave a ferocious account of themselves, buying time for the urgent deployment of one of the Wunderwaffen which was first used in the Defense of Kheriaha.*

*Through the use of that Wunderwaffe, the cowardly raid was defeated, though not without casualties among the aerial mages stationed at Remula, whose heroic sacrifices prevented the battle from spreading to the rest of the Eternal City and cause untold civilian casualties. According to military sources, the goal of this reckless operation was none other than the death of Colonel Eric von Lergen, who led the lightning strike into Ildoa following the Battle of Bovariastadt, and prevented the nefarious schemes of the vile conspiracy which started the so-called Crusade from reaching terrible fruition.*

*Leading the attack was none other than the Royal Wizard of the Allied Kingdom, a man whose official job requires him to advise the Albish royal family on all magical matters. It is believed by Imperial High Command that he might have acted on his own authority and without the authorization or awareness of the rest of the Albish military, although details are still scarce.*

*There is little doubt that this attack, which took place mere days before the planned transfer of responsibilities to the Unified States, will impact the tense ongoing diplomatic exchanges between the Empire and the Allied Kingdom. While the Kaiser and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have repeatedly stated their wish for a peaceful resolution for the conflict between our nations, the multiple provocations of the Allied Kingdom must surely be beginning to fray their patience ...*

Excerpt from the headlines of the *Berun Post*, February 10th, 1926.

---

Colonel Lergen : *"Alright. Alright. Let me see if I understand this correctly. Your teacher, the Royal Wizard of the Allied Kingdom, found ONE* [emphasis original] *mention in some pre-Inquisition text of some kind of evil wizard making monsters during the Dark Ages. From this, the words of a long-dead soldier who clearly had no idea what was going on, he came up with the theory that the Empire might have been infiltrated by some sort of recurring warlock who cracked the secret of immortality through reincarnation thousands of years ago."*

Niniane : *"That is correct, Colonel. Though I think he only really started believing it after what happened in Kemet, you can see why I had my doubts as to his mental state."*

Colonel Lergen : *"Mental state ?! Miss Niniane, that old man has clearly gone off the rails. The only question is whether that is simply a result of old age and the pressure of his job, or if there is something more sinister at play. You have been briefed about what happened in the Holy See, right ?"*

Niniane : *"I was brought up on what your diplomatic corps sent to ours following the end of the Crusade, yes."*

Colonel Lergen : *"Then you know about Being X and the indoctrination process. To be honest, the sole reason I don't think Merlin was indoctrinated by Being X like Doctor Schugel and Archbishop Beauvais were is that if that were the case, he wouldn't have tried to kill me."*

Niniane : *"Oh ? And why is that ? While you're clearly not the 'Not-Man', if such a being exists at all, you are obviously of great importance to the operations of Division Y."*

Colonel Lergen : *"... I'm afraid the answer to that is classified."*

Niniane : *"Does it have anything to do with the 'Lady of Stars' which appeared in Arene and Bovariastadt ?"*

Colonel Lergen : *"As I said, classified. In any case, I will need to make certain inquiries on my end, just in case there's something to Merlin's theory and he wasn't just cracking under the pressure. The reports of the Battle of Kheriaha indicate that, at the very least, the Heresiarch served another being before his defeat during the time of Ancient Kemet. If we assume that the resurgence of Mythos magic throughout History is linked with this entity, then we need to make sure the Reich hasn't been compromised. Especially now, with the Federation dabbling in things it has no understanding of."*

Niniane : *"I can see why you'd think that. And what about me, Colonel ?"*

Colonel Lergen : *"That is still to be decided, but most likely you will be shipped off to Division Y headquarters with the rest of our mage prisoners. You aren't the first to see reason and surrender instead of pointlessly fighting to the death. Of course, we'll have to set up some sort of special accommodation for you, since you are a woman and, well, some of your compatriots might hold a grudge for your actions."*

Niniane : *"Thank you. And what about Merlin ?"*

Colonel Lergen : *"That's more complicated. First, we need to determine whether or not he was indoctrinated. After that, it'll be out of my hands. He is more, let's say, politically troubling to hold prisoner, but we certainly aren't going to send him home until we've a proper peace treaty with the Allied Kingdom."*

Extract of the debriefing conducted between Colonel Eric von Lergen and the captive Albish operative, codename 'Niniane', February 10th, 1926.

---

*February 11th, 1926 – Londinium*

"It's over, then."

Though it was Kay who spoke the words aloud, the two other remaining members of the Round Table thought the same. The incendiary headlines of the newspapers spread out across the table between them, along with the reports each had compiled from their own sphere of influence and passed along, all told the same, undeniable story.

"The people are furious," said Mordred. "Control of the narrative has slipped from our grasp. They want the war to end, and if it costs us our heads, well, they aren't exactly going to weep for us."

The most incendiary headlines belonged to foreign newspapers, but even the Albish ones were far from kind. With the reputation of the ruling party tanked even further by Merlin's failed attack, those who had always opposed the country joining the war no longer hesitated in making it known. The unity which had formed in the wake of the Kingdom joining the war wasn't completely broken yet, but anyone could see it was inevitable.

"There is no evidence linking me to the attempt," said Kay, "so Churbull hasn't fired me yet … But he's made it clear there won't be anymore such deployment without his express authorization."

"Not that he is likely to stay in power for much longer either," muttered Agravain. "Even though we didn't involve him in the attack, it still doesn't look good for him."

"True," sighed Mordred. "The push for a peace treaty is growing stronger. People are worried that the Empire will finally have enough of our bullshit and send their Wunderwaffen here to teach us a lesson."

"What can we do if that happens ?" asked Agravain.

"Merlin left us enough of his apprentices that we can maintain the Kemetian wards around the capital if the Empire tries to attack, at least," replied Kay. "But on the other hand, that's it : we cannot defend anything else beyond the capital."

Which meant that, if the Empire decided to cripple their industry and military bases using targeted raids with mage-killers and Devils, there'd be nothing they could do to stop them.

"The only thing we can do at this point is make sure that the knowledge of the Kemetian wards isn't lost," said Agravain. "I have been in touch with Merlin's remaining apprentices, and they are working on making as many copies of the spell-work as they can for sending overseas."

"That's a good idea," said Kay. "At the very least, it will ensure there is something to dissuade the Empire from trying to take over the world if there's a change of governance over there."

The simple truth was that they had lost. They had tried one final gambit, to match their most powerful Elder magic asset against the Wunderwaffen, and it had failed. Albion had never been able to fight the Empire in a land war, and its maritime superiority had sunk alongside the Hood. In the long run, if Merlin's apprentices taught every mage in Albion how to cast the

Kemetian spells, they might – might – be able to fight Division Y on a somewhat equal footing, but those spells hadn't protected the fleet from the Imperials' Kraken.

The surprise attack on the Rhine, the sinking of the Francois fleet, the calamity in Kemet, and now this raid on Remula – all had dragged Albion's reputation through the mud.

If Lergen was the Not-Man, then he had won this round, and perhaps the entire game along with it. There was nothing more the Allied Kingdom could do to stop him. The Round Table were the only ones with even an inkling that something more sinister was going on behind the Wunderwaffen, and their influence was in tatters. Agravain's spy network had been gutted, and his top operative in the Empire was in the hands of Division Y (and, given they had his birth name, spilling everything he knew). The Empire was stronger than ever, both militarily and diplomatically, while Albion's position hadn't been this weak in decades. Their economy was in a downward spiral that would hit critical mass in a few months at best, their reputation in the crapper, and their colonies were quietly starting to sharpen their knives as whispers of independence spread.

"I suppose that, besides that, all that is left is to pray," said Mordred ruefully. "But to whom, that's the question. I would rather live under the boot of the Empire than be mind-controlled into singing the praises of this 'Being X'."

"We have to believe that, even if there exists such malevolent spirits that disguise themselves as God, He still watches over us," said Kay. "We failed, and will pay the price for it; I accept that. But surely no good and just deity would punish the entire human race for our failings."

Of course, that assumed that there were good and just deities, which a long, hard look at Mankind's various religions made somewhat difficult.

---

*February 17th, 1926 – Mage Prisoners Camp, near Castle Schwartzstein*

When William Drake had heard that the captivity of him and his men was going to be handled by Division Y, he hadn't known what to expect, but had feared the worst all the same. But instead of some lightless cell in the depths of an Imperial fortress, he had been brought to a pleasant cottage in the middle of the mountains. Oh, there were guards, of course, but they seemed to be there as much for the prisoners' own protection as to prevent escape.

His escort led him to the entrance, where a tall man wearing the uniform of the Legadonian air mages corps greeted him.

"Hello, friend," the tall man said with a wide smile as he extended his hand. "I'm Colonel Anson Sue, from the Legadonian Entente."

"Colonel William Drake, Albish Air Mage Corps," William replied, shaking the older man's hand. "I've heard about you."

"And I, you. How is your uncle, if you don't mind me asking ?"

"Enjoying his forced retirement as well as he can the last time I saw him."

Anson grimaced. "Yes, I heard about that. Still, he made it out alive, and that's more than can be said for most who faced Division Y, heh ?"

"True," conceded William. His uncle, as well as himself, had been very lucky, even as so many of their men hadn't.

"Come on in," the Legadonian said, leading the way inside. "I'll show you to your room, then give you a tour of the building. Afterwards, I think there's still some leftover pie from my wife in the kitchen if you're interested."

"Your family was brought here along with you ?" William said, frowning.

"Ah, I see what you are thinking," Anson chuckled. "Yes, my wife and daughter were brought here along with me, but no, they aren't here as hostages to ensure my good behavior. They were brought here for their own safety. Being related to the first officer to surrender at the Osfjord came with certain dangers."

"… I am sorry to hear that."

William didn't know for a fact that the partisan uprisings in Legadonia following the Entente's surrender had been fomented by the Albish secret services, but he would have been willing to bet a lot of money on it. For all his patriotism, the aerial mage wasn't blind to his nation's streak of ruthless pragmatism when it came to global politics.

"Don't be," Anson waved him off. "It wasn't your fault. I'm bitterly familiar with soldiers being forced to follow the orders of politicians who don't know what they are doing. Anyway, our families aren't housed in this building but into the village nearby, among the civilians."

The room assigned to William looked comfortable enough, and as they moved toward the mess area Anson went on to describe the rules by which the war prisoners were expected to behave :

"There is a roll call every day at dawn and dusk," explained Anson. "We were told that, if anyone is missing, the mage-killers will be dispatched to find them. No one has been stupid enough to try, and I would appreciate it if you made sure that continues."

William supposed it made sense. While he couldn't have placed their location on a map, he was fairly certain they were deep in Imperial territory. Even if they managed to slip past the guards, where were they supposed to go next ? Division Y would pick up on any use of magic, and without a computation orb, the chances of any aerial mage of escaping, already slim, were all but zero.

"Meals are at seven in the morning, noon and seven in the afternoon," the Legadonian continued. "We get international newspapers delivered each week on Wednesday, and you can request a particular newspaper if you want. We can send letters out, but they are read beforehand to ensure nobody gives out important information, whether by accident or deliberately. Now, you may have been trained into writing coded messages into innocent-seeming letters, but if so, then I really advise you not to try that here. I've heard that the Imperials have, shall we say, unique methods of checking outgoing letters."

That in itself was important information, thought William. But after what he'd seen in Remula, he wasn't going to test it.

"We can also receive letters from the outside world, so long as they are addressed to the War Ministry in Berun – you can ask the guards for the details, I haven't needed to use that service so I don't know exactly how it works. Of course, such letters are also opened and read before being sent here."

"Of course," William repeated with a small smile.

"Apart from that, we've set up a schedule for daily exercise and other activities to keep busy," concluded Anson. "All in all, I'd say all of us here were very lucky."

Try as he might, William couldn't find it in him to disagree.

---

*February 26th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

The girl was playing with the other children in the courtyard, running and jumping and singing songs whose words she only half understood. She was different from all the others : they had beautiful skin the color of the night sky, and eyes red like rubies, while her skin was pale like milk, her hair blond, and her eyes blue.

When she'd seen them for the first time, clinging to Tanya's side, one of them had run to see her, glancing shyly at Tanya.

*"Hi !"* he had greeted her in the Imperial tongue, which she knew even if she didn't remember learning it. *"I'm Vreta. What's your name ?"*

She'd told him she didn't have a name anymore, because a monster had eaten it when trying to eat her. Vreta had nodded, as if that made perfect sense.

*"Well, you need a new one then,"* he had said. *"How about Kory ? It was my mom's name, but ... she doesn't need it anymore."* For a moment, his smile had wavered, before returning in full. *"Do you want it ?"*

*"Yes,"* she had replied.

After that, they had spent the rest of the day playing together, with Vreta telling her the names of all his friends and explaining their games to her. When the sun had set and it was time for dinner, she had run to Tanya and told her about her new name, and Tanya had smiled and patted her head and told her she was happy for her.

From that day on, everyone had called her Kory. She'd spent more and more time away from Tanya and with the other children during the day, before one evening, she'd timidly asked if she could stay with them during the night instead of sleeping next to Tanya.

Tanya had said yes, but had also promised Kory that she could change her mind whenever she wanted.

The kids all slept together in one big room, with two adults looking over them. Sometimes Kory had nightmares and woke up screaming, afraid that the burning light had come back to take her new name like it had taken the old one. When that happened, she woke up with Vreta and the others holding her tight, whispering soothing words and telling her that she was safe, that Tanya was here and wouldn't let anything hurt them.

The other kids had nightmares too, but they didn't scream when they woke up. She had asked Tanya why, and she had looked sad and told her that was because before living in the castle, they had lived in a bad place with monsters who would have hurt them if they made noise. Kory didn't understand, but she made sure to hug those who had bad dreams when they happened, just like they did for her.

The children paused their latest game of tag as they noticed someone new entering the courtyard, and rushed to greet her.

"Hello, Miss Elya !" they all called out together.

"Hello, everyone," said the woman with a smile. "How are you doing today ?"

Miss Elya was in a weird chair with wheels, because she had gotten hurt and needed to heal to get her strength back. Kory had been with Tanya when the bad people had come into the castle (that had been before she was brave enough to sleep with the other children), and the noise had scared her, but Tanya had hugged her and promised her that she was safe and no monster would touch her ever again.

And that had been true, because Tanya and everyone else in the castle were very strong, and they would beat every monster that tried to hurt them.

Everyone started talking excitedly at once, telling the Imperial woman about everything that had happened since they'd last seen her. They told her about the food they'd eaten, about the games they'd played, about the stories their caretakers had been told and the lessons they'd had. And Miss Elya listened with a smile on her face, patiently waiting for the Nazzadi to find the proper way to tell her what they wanted to say in Imperial.

Kory liked Miss Elya. She liked everyone in the castle, even if she liked Tanya the best.

---

*"Easy there, soldier. You are safe here, I promise."*

*"W-where ... ?"*

*"You are in Castle Schwartzstein, the headquarters of Division Y. Do you remember what Division Y is ?"*

*"The ... the Wunderwaffen. You make them."*

*"Yes, we do. Now, can you tell me your name, soldier ?"*

*"I am ... I am Lieutenant Theobald Wüstemann."*

*"That's right, Lieutenant. What's the last thing you remember ?"*

*"We were deployed in Remula. The Albish … the Albish launched an attack on our headquarters there. My unit engaged them at Colonel Lergen's orders. We had the advantage in technology and experience, but there were too many of them. We … I … fell ?"*

*"You did. You and your unit fought to the last, and it was thanks to you that the Reich won the day in the end. You fell as heroes of the Empire, and have all been recognized as such."*

*"That's … great. … I am thirsty. Can I have some water, please ?"*

*"You can have something to drink, but I am afraid water is discouraged given your condition. Here. Drink this, slowly."*

*"It's delicious. What is that ?"*

*"Blood. Mage blood, to be precise."*

*"Oh. … So the rumors were true, then."*

*"Rumors ? Hmm. I suppose it was inevitable that word would spread. But let me explain to you what actually happened. Though you died in Remula, your body was in good enough condition that it was sent here, the headquarters of Division Y. We performed a certain magical ritual upon it, bringing you back to life as an Untote, a member of Projekt U – although I'm told they are called mage-killers or hunters by those outside the Division."*

*"I am … a vampire ?"*

*"That is a good enough explanation, though we don't call you that for secrecy reasons, as well as to prevent mistakes based on false assumptions. The first thing you should know is that yes, sunlight will kill you. That's why the Untoten are always wearing full-body uniforms when deployed. Secondly, you require mage blood to survive and use your new abilities, which replace the magic you were capable of before. We will ensure you receive enough blood to satiate your hunger. Should you ever attack another Imperial mage, however, you will be put down."*

*"Has that … ever happened ?"*

*"Yes, back when the Projekt started. It hasn't happened since the Division was formally revealed as part of the Reich's warmachine against Dacia, though, and I fully intend for that to continue."*

*"… good."*

*"Your pay will be increased to match your value to the Reich, and your family informed that you survived and were transferred to a top-secret Imperial unit. Speaking strictly from a legal standpoint, you belong to the Empire as a military asset. However, I don't believe in forcing people to work, let alone fight, if they don't want to. And while what we did to your corpse was legal, it was also done without your consent – we can't risk word of how the Untoten are created spreading, you understand. If you truly believe that you cannot continue as you are*

*now, then all you need to do is walk out into the sun, or ask us for assistance in terminating your existence. Should you choose to end your existence now, you will be recorded as having perished a valiant death in Remula, and your family will be compensated accordingly."*

*"You have terrible bedsides manners. Ma'am. If, if you don't mind me saying."*

*"I'm aware. But I take my responsibilities seriously, which means I have to be the one doing this. Due to my own unique condition, I apparently have a calming effect on supersoldiers. Besides, I'm the one in charge, so it's only right."*

*"I see. Still, that's a heavy decision to make. Can I speak with someone else who went through this ?"*

*"Of course. My aide will answer all your questions : she was one of the first successes of the Projekt."*

Extract from the recorded conversation between Director Degurechaff and Lieutenant Theobald Wüstemann following the latter's integration into Projekt U, March 2nd, 1926.

---

*March 8th, 1926 – Berun, Imperial Capital*

Maximilian Johann von Uger stood in front of the door to his home, one hand holding a bouquet of flowers, the other pressing the doorbell, and forced himself to remain calm despite the maelstrom of emotions raging within him.

When the announcement had come that the Werwölfe were authorized for leave, he had been overjoyed. He hadn't been able to see his wife and daughter since his injuries on the Rhine Front, and while being able to exchange letters with his wife was a blessing, it didn't compare to seeing them with his own eyes.

His smile widened fractionally as he remembered the presentation they had all sat through before being allowed to go on leave. The Director had looked more uncomfortable than he'd ever seen her, standing there while Doctor Iosefka explained to the gathered Werwölfe why, no matter what, they couldn't have sex while on leave. It didn't matter if it was with their wife, their fiancee, their girlfriend, or a random hook-up : no one had any idea what the union of a human and a Werwolf would look like, and they weren't going to risk it happening in the wild.

And no, the usual precautions wouldn't be enough, because nobody knew how much that aspect of Werwolf physiology had changed (and they weren't going to test it in Castle Schwartzstein, thank God). From what Maximilian had heard, the female Werwölfe (of which there were far fewer of than males) had been told the exact same thing earlier, in a separate presentation.

Admittedly, it had been something of a dampener on his good mood, but carnal activities were far from being the most important part of his relationship with his wife. And while he'd refrained from it, the rest of the Werwölfe had been merciless in their teasing of Grantz for his relationship with the daughter of Colonel Sue. Grantz had been careful to conceal it from

his brethren, but the story of how she'd run to hug him when they'd come back from Remula had been impossible to suppress.

Given Grantz's character, how insistent Doctor Iosefka's lesson had been, and the fact young Mary's father was the single most powerful combat mage of the Legadonian Entente by virtue of surviving the longest, Maximilian was fairly certain there was nothing to worry about on that front.

The door opened, pulling him out of his recollection. And there she was, exactly as beautiful as he remembered her.

"… Maximilian ?"

"Hello, Isabella," he said with a smile, surprised to hear the crack in his voice. "Sorry I didn't come earlier –"

His apology was cut off as Isabella threw herself at him, her arms wrapping around his back as she hugged him, shaking, tears running down her face. Maximilian hugged her back, feeling his own tears run freely while the bouquet slipped from his hand and landed on the ground, forgotten.

He'd been so afraid this would never come to pass, and if not for Division Y's work, it never would have. But at long, long last, he was home.

God be praised, he was home.

---

*March 10th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

Nala walked through the corridors of Castle Schwartzstein in her human shape, wearing the uniform of an Imperial soldier with the emblem of Division Y on her left shoulder and the grey wings of the Lunarchs on the right. Despite the late hour, there were still other people moving purposefully throughout the fortress, and she nodded in greetings to each of them, paying no mind to the looks most of them couldn't help themselves but give her. Even in such a place, full of wonders and horrors, she drew attention.

It had been a relief to find out that her human form had been mostly unchanged by her transformation from Eikon to Lunarch. Outside of her blackened armor, she appeared like an idealized version of her former self, slightly larger and more muscular, with all the minor imperfections smoothed off. Her eyes, however, betrayed her inhuman nature, as they now shone with the same silver radiance that blazed from her wings when she assumed her Lunarch form.

The folks of Division Y were treating her and the others well, though she could have done without the curious researchers asking for biological samples. She had submitted to all the proper examinations, of course : the mere thought that whatever the Lady of Stars had done to her might be temporary, that she might be at risk of returning to that state of mindless, fanatical devotion, had been utterly terrifying.

Outside of the regular exams, the Lunarchs were being trained by the aerial mages of Division Y, with the Untoten and sometimes the Director herself joining them. Back in the Holy See, their training had been minimal : the Congregation had kept them all hidden underground, and even the largest caverns hadn't been enough to properly practice flying. The combat instincts they'd gained by being turned into Eikons had remained after their becoming Lunarchs, along with all their other abilities except for the indoctrination field, but it was far from enough in the Director's eyes.

After only two months of that training, Nala could well understand how the Imperial supersoldiers had been able to win such crushing victories. Yet gruelling as it was, the training was strangely satisfying at the same time. It had taken Nala a few weeks to realize why : unlike her Eikon powers, the skills she was learning were something she was gaining on her own, not something which was put into her mind without her realizing or consenting to it. As she and the other Lunarchs were finding out, self-improvement was a great way to deal with the trauma of being turned into a living, enslaved weapon of magical destruction – or maybe it was the regular mandatory sessions discussing what had happened to them with the 'mind-doctors' the Director had recruited.

Or maybe it was the group discussions with the other members of the Path of Stars.

At least in Castle Schwartzstein, the Path of Stars wasn't a religion. It was a philosophy, born of Imperial rationalism, the occult notions in which Division Y dabbled, and a pinch of the Director's own occasional musings on duty and morality. It wasn't a cult, and they didn't worship the Director – the researcher who had introduced her to it had been very insistent on the later. During meetings, they talked about what had happened at work (and given where they all worked, there were always interesting stories to tell), and discussed matters that straggled the line between theology and … whatever the name for the study of eldritch forces was (mythology ? that didn't sound right). Most of these talks flew right over Nala's head, but she was still frequently asked questions, due to her unique perspective.

The Lunarchs had been asked if they wanted to send anything back to their families on the Southern Continent. With the Great War slowly petering out, sending letters by boat was possible, although any letters would be proof-read to ensure they didn't accidentally reveal classified information. Nala had sent one, telling her family that she was still alive, and that a lot of things had happened she couldn't talk about. The additional supplies the Church had promised in exchange for their service had obviously stopped now that the Holy See was a haunted crater, but now that the Lunarchs had been recruited into Division Y, a part of their pay was being used to replace that (and, given that their pay was based on that of Imperial aerial mages, it was quite substantial).

It wasn't a bad life. Certainly better than the mind-slavery she'd known before. Still, it wasn't one without stresses either, which was why she was going to the room which had been converted into Castle Schwartzstein's chapel. The room was one of the most heavily warded in the entire castle, to make sure that nothing got into the minds of those inside.

Nala wasn't going there to pray : after what had happened to her, it would be a long time before she did that again, if ever. The occultists who had debriefed her had explained that

Being X, the entity responsible for the Holy See's madness, was only masquerading as God, but the shock to her faith had still been severe.

Instead, she was here to sit down, close her eyes, and meditate. To center herself and find peace and acceptance with all that had been done to her.

There was already someone in the chapel when she entered. That wasn't surprising : the denizens of Castle Schwartzstein kept all sorts of hours, and the kind of jobs they had meant that there was almost always somebody in here looking for spiritual comfort.

Nala recognized the young Nazzadi woman. She was Zerayah, one of the newly trained aerial mages who had participated in the Battle of Bovariastadt, and the one who had confronted Adelheid von Schugel, the Imperial renegade whose work had made Nala and the other second-generation Eikons so much more dangerous to Humanity. Unlike Nala, Zerayah was here to pray, sitting down in front of several dozen candles – one for every Nazzadi she remembered who'd died before the Director had come to save her people from their doomed homeworld.

For the next few hours, the two of them sat together in companionable silence, thinking of past harms, present blessings, and future triumphs.

---

*March 17th, 1926 – Parisee – Police Headquarters*

Officer Sophie Jarnac, of the Parisean Police, sighed with relief as she stepped out of the early spring rains which were falling all over the capital and into her appartment building. It had been another long day at work, despite the mood in Parisee growing ever more optimistic since the end of the Republic's part in the Great War.

There weren't many women in the police force, though that number had been steadily rising since the War had started due to the men being conscripted, sent to the Rhine, and not coming back in far too many cases. That violent demographic shift had resulted in increased pressure to give women the right to vote. As someone charged with enforcing the law, Sophie had to admit that it annoyed her to no end that she'd no say in what those laws even were, but she still did her duty.

She had first been recruited by the Parisean Police to work in administration (there was a lot of paperwork involved with keeping the peace in the Francois capital), but had been promoted due to the loss of manpower forcing her superiors to widen their recruitment pool. Supposedly, it was meant as a temporary measure, but it hadn't been repealed yet.

Of course, just because women were gaining ground in the workforce didn't mean attitudes had adjusted to follow suit. The top of the hierarchy was still comprised entirely of men who hadn't been conscripted for one reason or another (mostly because they'd been too old), and they were reacting to the changes with predictable but annoying grumblings which crossed the line into infuriating far too often.

Which was why she was looking forward to going to bed and spending her rest day relaxing in peace. She checked her mailbox : bill, bill, an advert for the opera house in the

neighbourhood which had re-opened now that the war censorship laws had been repealed, and an envelope with her name and address written in a crisp, familiar handwriting, with an Imperial stamp.

With a smile, Sophie pocketed the latest letter from Lieutenant Willibald König. It was always a pleasure to hear from him : in the little time they'd spent working together, the Lieutenant had not once looked down on her for being a member of the fairer sex. Him and the other members of the Imperial Army with whom she had journeyed into the Parisean Catacombs had never been anything less than perfectly professional, and from what König had let slip his direct superior was also a woman.

Sophie had been worried König might've gotten caught in that mess in Ildoa, so she was relieved to hear from him. She doubted the letter would contain many details – König was too professional for that – but it was still better than nothing.

Hmm. Come to think of it, she had been steadily accumulating leave days in the last months. Maybe she could make a trip to the Empire once the current situation with Albion had calmed down ?

---

*April 1st, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

"Here is your coffee, ma'am," said Visha as she placed a cup of fragrant liquid on my desk.

Now that the sun had set, Visha was up and about. Her becoming nocturnal as a result of her second dose of Endlose Nacht had made her duties as my adjutant somewhat difficult to perform, but she had looked on the verge of tears when I had tried to tell her that, so I had given up on replacing her (not that it had been that hard of a decision, really : for one thing, I would have missed her coffee too much). Instead, I had adapted my own schedule.

After all, I required very little sleep these days. I would have been worried about how that might stunt my growth, but, well. Somehow I doubted that was going to be much of an issue. At least that meant I could indulge in my adjutant's delicious coffee without worrying about it impacting my growth.

"Thank you, Visha," I replied while breathing in the brew's delicious scent. "How are Wüstemann and the others adjusting ?"

"They're doing much better now," she replied without hesitation. "I think they're ready to start their training regimen in full, instead of the watered-down version we've had them on until now."

"Good. We'll start on tomorrow night, then. Make a note in my schedule, please."

"Of course, ma'am."

The next couple of hours were spent in companionable silence as the two of us worked through the endless paperwork that an organization the size of Division Y inevitably produced. Though it might surprise the common Imperial citizen, even an organization tasked

with delving into the darkest depths of magic and weaponizing them for the benefit of the Reich needed to handle paperwork, and given how potentially catastrophic the consequences of a single mistake in our work could be, I had made damn sure everyone in Castle Schwartzstein knew the importance of proper filing, documentation and reporting.

One set of reports concerned the situation in Bovariastadt. The testing of the population for Mythos influence was still on-going – there had been a *lot* of people in the city when it had been captured by the Ildoan Army – but advancing on schedule and, more importantly, nothing had been detected so far. The hole in the sky leading to a perpetual night sky was still there and showing no sign of going away, but it wasn't growing either. There were talks of abandoning the city and converting it into an observation outpost, or a secondary location for Division Y's activities – one which would be publicly known, unlike Castle Schwartzstein. I told Visha to make a note to contact Generals Zettour and Rudersdorf to talk about it.

Tonight, the last set of paperwork I needed to go through regarded the latest additions to the ranks of Projekt W. We had lost twenty-five Werwölfe during this whole mess with Ildoa : ten at Bovariastadt, and another fifteen at the Holy See, but with the situation in the south handled, we'd been able to start performing the Rite of Transfiguration again, with the latest full moon having finished the previous night.

Our attempts to improve the ritual's survivability had worked. Where before only a third of the subjects had survived before, now we were around a fifty/fifty survival rate. Of course, we weren't sure whether that was due to our occultists becoming more experienced, our preparations actually working, or just the fact that with the Great War having calmed down the subjects we were getting had already survived months of being crippled before being shipped off to Castle Schwartzstein.

In total, the three moon cycles had resulted in eighty-one Phantoms, ninety-one Mirages, nine Echoes, nine Shadows, twelve Spectres, eight Whispers, three Nightmare, and more Efreet. In addition, one more new type of Werwolf had been discovered, with a single instance manifesting during February's full moon, which, after several days of debate among the occultists assigned to Projekt W, had eventually been named the Vampire-type. By that point, I'd been too annoyed with the whole thing to care about the overlap with Projekt U, and besides, I could see where they were coming from.

Like the Whisper, the Vampire was capable of flight, but there the similarities between the two types ended. The Whisper's capabilities were tailored for reconnaissance, while the Vampire was an aerial equivalent to the Nightmare when it came to sheer destructive potential.

Where the Whisper had insectoid-looking wings, the Vampire's were similar to a bat's, and its regeneration rate was incredible. Tests on livestock had shown that he could cause blood to boil with a touch, to predictable devastating effects, and he could fire hand-long, thorned barbs with enough strength to pierce through body armor and flesh alike. Finally, like all Werwölfe, he possessed an 'ultimate attack', which in his case took the form of a sphere of crimson energy which caused all living things caught within its area of effect to violently bleed from every orifice, regardless of what obstacles and defenses may be in the way.

There also seemed to be some worrying mental effects, but the discipline of the Imperial Army combined with my presence had ensured the Vampire wouldn't lose himself to the instincts of his inhuman self. And a dedicated anti-infantry, flight-capable Werwolf type would likely be very useful in the times to come.

When I had read Colonel Lergen's report, I had wanted to laugh at the stupidity of the Albish. But unfortunately, considering unlikely, far-fetched scenarios with potentially apocalyptic consequences was my job, and what should have been easily dismissed as the ramblings of an old man refusing to accept that his country's supremacy was over sounded disturbingly plausible given the sort of work Division Y performed on the regular.

My first thought had been that each instance of the Not-Man had been another poor bastard being used by Being X in order to drum up support for the religions worshipping him, all to soothe his ego. But that didn't make sense, because why would the priests of the two eras go to such lengths to erase all traces that the conflict had ever happened ? There should be monuments, myths and legends commemorating the heroism of the Lord's chosen who had triumphed over the slaves of Hell.

So instead, I had considered what I knew from the perspective I'd brought with me from my previous world. Once you stopped looking at Being X from the perspective of religion and instead from the cold, eldritch rationale of the Mythos, this looked a lot like some sort of long struggle/game between two powerful entities, with the people of this world caught in-between. Loath as I was to give Being X any credit whatsoever, he would probably be the lighter shade of black in such a conflict : for all that the Eikons used mind-control, they didn't eat people and had only appeared in response to Division Y's own Mythos creations.

If that theory was correct, then the best case scenario was that due to the unique circumstances of my reincarnation, I had somehow messed up this antediluvian competition and created a third side, so to speak. Unfortunately, I couldn't disregard the possibility that Division Y and myself were being used as pawns by this 'Being N', just like the Albish feared. I had taken all precautions I could think of to prevent the Division from being subverted, and I was as certain as could be that there wasn't some subtle mind-control at work, but that didn't mean we were immune to other avenues of manipulation.

I could feel the siren call of paranoia, and wondered whether this wasn't all part of Being X's plan to make me doubt myself and paralyse me with indecision. In the end, however, I didn't have much of a choice. With the Congregation of Michael wiped out and the threat of the Eikons removed, the Reich should have been in a military position secure enough to force a gentle peace and scale back the efforts of Division Y. But now that the communists had access to some of the most dangerous lore we'd created, doing so would be suicidal. We could only guess as to what horrors would spawn in Russy as a result of the Federation's ignorant experimentation : even the knowledge of my former self drew a blank on how bad 'powerful, amoral country with a cavalier attitude to human loss attempting to weaponize the Mythos in a hurry' could be. Well, except 'very bad', obviously.

We had made some theories for a worst-case scenario based on what had almost happened in the Holy See, however. Which was why, once I was done with my paperwork, I left my office and went down several levels, going through the multiple security checks guarding the way

to the heart of Division Y, a place so well-defended it made the Kaiser's private chambers look like a public park. Even Visha had to stay behind at some point : while I trusted her, she was still only a Lieutenant, and if I wanted my subordinates to follow regulations then I had to do the same.

Alone within the most secure room in the Reich, I entered a twenty-digit access code known only to myself, and pulled the activation lever. I felt, with a sharpness that had increased with every use of Kosmosblut, how reality itself strained as the Denkmaschine awoke from its slumber. Thinking of the power bill for this room alone made me want to cry. There were multiple generators across the castle whose sole purpose was to provide current to the Denkmaschine, each one a cutting-edge model that greedily drank enough fuel to feed a tank in an active war zone.

The rows of custom-made computation orbs lit up as the Denkmaschine turned on. Every spell formula known to the Empire, from the most useless cantrip to attack spells which had never been actually cast due to requiring more mana than a hundred aerial mages combined possessed, had been loaded onto these orbs before we'd first activated it years ago, and every Mythos spell discovered since as well.

My understanding of the differences between sentience, sapience and sophonce were vague at best, but I was reasonably confident the Denkmaschine wasn't any of those, despite what its name might imply. The hardware it used might be unconventional, but it was not that different from the supercomputers of my old world. And sure, there had always been wild speculation about Artificial Intelligences taking over the world, wiping out Humanity, or both, but by the time of my death such fears had still been very unfounded. No, if the Denkmaschine brought about the end of the world, it would be because of how we flesh-and-blood mortals used it and nothing else.

There were two different ways to interact with the Denkmaschine. The first was to load up another file inside it, using large and clumsy data storages that were a hundred times less weight-efficient than basic paper. That method was how we had loaded the scraps of recovered lore into the engine before asking it to 'reconstruct' the original. The second method, and the one I was going to use now, was a simple keyboard which could be used to 'ask' questions to the Denkmaschine, which it would then attempt to answer using the full breadth of arcane knowledge at its disposition. Given that, again, the Denkmaschine wasn't sentient, it often took multiple tries to get an answer, re-phrasing the question again and again.

My fingers hovered above the keys for a moment as, despite myself, I hesitated. Was this really the correct course of action ? Would it help save the world, or only make things worse in the long term ? For all my pretence of rationality, had I succumbed to the sunk cost fallacy, and kept doubling down on Mythos warfare as the answer to all my problems ?

I sighed, and reminded myself that what I was going to do was hardly irreversible. The vaults of the castle were full of the Wunderwaffen the Denkmaschine had suggested and which would never be used. In all likelihood, this was merely going to be another one of those, but the threat of the Federation was such that it was better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it.

Pushing my doubts and fears aside, I typed the first iteration of the question I had come to ask :

*'How do I kill a god ?'*

Chapter End Notes

AN :

Me : "Somehow, this crossover between a brutal deconstruction of the Isekai genre and the horrors of the Cthulhu Mythos ended up containing the most wholesome piece of fiction I have ever written. How appropriate for a Christmas update."

Tanya : "Hey, Eldritch ChatGPT, how do I commit deicide ?"

... damnit, Tanya.

It's been exactly one year since the publication of this story's first chapter. Happy Holidays, everyone ! My plan to finish this story in 2023 have, obviously, been discarded, but I still plan to finish AYGWM some time next year. I have a blueprint for the rest of the story, but you all know how capricious the Muse can be by now, so I wouldn't be surprised if it ends up either completely discarded or with significant additions.

Fans of CthulhuTech might recognize Vreta's name. The fact that the poor boy genuinely has a batter life than his counterpart says something - I am not sure what exactly, but definitely something. And Kory's name isn't a reference to anything except the fact that it is listed among the suggested female Nazzadi names for player characters.

Tanya finally rolled a Vampire ! After so many rolls, she finally got every Tager type in the ranks of Projekt W. Now, the question is whether any of them will achieve Metamorphosis and become even more powerful and terrible.

Also, yes, there were women in the French Police Force before women were allowed to vote. I swear, everytime I think I can't possibly get more disappointed by The Past, I learn something else to shake my head at in astonishment.

Next chapter, we will see what is going on in the Russy Federation. Spoiler alert : what I have planned will make the Scourge of Yharnam look like a common cold. According to my notes, the next arc is the penultimate arc of this story, so it's time to remove the final brakes on the escalation train and embrace the madness.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts, comments and ideas. Until then, I wish you all a happy end of the year.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Following the reports on the defeat of the Dacian Army and the surrender of the Legadonian Entente, it has been decided that the greater good of the Federation requires us to put aside our righteous distaste for all things related to magic, that tool of oppression of the bourgeois and the aristocrat.*

*People with knowledge of the occult are to be reassigned from the lageri and given a chance to serve the Federation despite their crimes against Communism. They will work under the direct supervision of the Commissariat to develop methods by which the Empire's so-called Wunderwaffen might be countered, in order to defend the People from Imperial aggression."*

Excerpt from the decree establishing the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People, signed into effect by General Secretary Josef Jugashvili on December 12th, 1924 (access restricted to members of the Politburo).

---

*"Agent Natasha has disappeared from the room assigned to her. Guards reported hearing strange noises in the night, followed by sounds of violence and the breaking of glass.*

*By the time the guards entered the room, they found that it had been torn apart, with the concrete walls covered in what seemed to be claw marks. There was no trace of blood, and upon further investigation, the window had clearly been broken from the inside as something was thrown or jumped through it.*

*Due to the late hour, there were no eye-witnesses, and the snowstorm which covered the capital at the time prevented any footprint or other sign from remaining outside. The guards tasked with keeping watch over the building were interrogated, but didn't notice anything : after pushing them further, it was discovered they hadn't been performing their rounds properly but taking refuge from the cold weather. They have been appropriately punished for their lack of devotion to the Federation.*

*Considering the report of Agent Natasha's last mission, it is our belief that she fell victim to some manner of Imperial operative sent after her following her heroic mission in the heart of the Empire. While her loss is tragic, we should be redouble our vigilance in securing all future efforts to match the Reich's weaponized magic.*

*In addition, it might be appropriate to send a message to the Empire's spymasters that we will not tolerate their assassination of one of our most valued assets on our own territory. To that end, I suggest a purge of the known Imperial informants within the Federation, whom we have so far allowed to ply their craft in order to monitor them. This is even more important since such agents are sure to be called upon by our foreign adversaries to locate the item which was retrieved during Agent Natasha's last mission."*

Internal report of the Committee for State Security, February 5th, 1926.

---

*"Esteemed Comrade General Secretary,*

*As is ever the case with the degenerate aristocrats who propagate the Imperialistic ideology, their claims that magic is a complex matter are nothing more than lies meant to keep the People from seizing their destiny with their own hands. The artefact our brave agents liberated from the greedy hands of the foreign oppressors, once translated from Imperial to Russy, is simplicity itself to use, requiring none of the corrupt academic learning which has been used to oppress the People for so long.*

*The artefact in question is a compilation of various magic rituals, centered around the mastery of life itself. Several of them seem especially promising, and thus, we humbly request for the facilities and resources needed to perform small-scale testing, in order to better learn their effects (as the descriptions of the book itself are frustratingly vague, as one would expect from the bourgeoisie trying to conceal their advantages behind a veil of mysticism and superstition).*

*The artefact has been sent to the Institute which, in your wisdom, you ordered assembled following the callous demonstration of the Imperial Wunderwaffen against the forcibly conscripted Dacian workers. Under the gentle guidance of the Commissariat, there is no doubt that the researchers who were given the opportunity to serve the State in spite of their bourgeois deviancy will be able to turn the knowledge previously hoarded by the aristocrats to the service of the People."*

Excerpt from a message addressed to General Secretary Josef Jugashvili, February 12th, 1926.

---

*"The new facilities are proving perfectly adequate for our needs, as expected of the Party's great wisdom and genius allocation of resources. The isolation of our research camp will help prevent any traitors to the Party from discovering its location and sending it to their foreign masters, and the battalion of brave soldiers assigned to guarding the facility is more than adequate to our needs.*

*The mana-capable individuals recovered from the re-education camps have been very cooperative with our research. They have only needed correction from the members of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs a handful of times when they first arrived at the Institute, and have been very obedient since.*

*We have begun experimenting with the simplest sections of the book, with promising results. However, additional mana-capable individuals would be a tremendous help in accelerating our mastery of the Imperial mystical weaponry for the good of the Federation."*

Excerpt from a report of the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People, February 15th, 1926.

---

*"Another three mages died today, none of them well. One of them, a disciple of the infamous court mage Grigori, cursed us all as he was being eaten alive by some kind of black sludge – his imprecations were only silenced when we detonated the explosives lining up the chamber, before sending in the cleaners with flamethrowers.*

*This makes it twenty-three mages we've lost since that damned book was delivered to the Institute. And while the cantrips we've figured out are fascinating from an academic standpoint, growing flowers and controlling vermin aren't what our superiors are interested in. They want superweapons of their own, something to match the Empire's Wunderwaffen. That's all they've ever wanted from us, why they pulled me and the others from the camps.*

*We suggested re-establishing the aerial mage corps months ago, but that was rejected, on the basis that those didn't do the Entente and the Republic a lot of good when the Imperials came knocking. Of course, aerial mages would still be useful to the Federation Army, but the real reason is that Comrade Josef is still terrified of any power he cannot directly control, and that giving computation orbs to people you sent to the lageri along with their entire family isn't a good idea.*

*Since, unlike the rest of Russy, we've been given access to the unredacted reports of the Party's spies abroad regarding these things, I can well understand their interest. For now, the Imperials are too busy protecting their territory from the Albish and playing nice with the rest of the world, but that cannot last. To think, not thirty years ago our two countries were some of the closest allies this world has ever seen ! If not for the Revolution, we might just've asked the Imps for their secrets and they would have shared them with us.*

*Well, maybe. Most likely, I'm just being too nostalgic. That, or drunk. The vodka in this place is disgusting, but it does have a nice kick to it. One or two more glasses and I will stop seeing that poor bastard's face as he dies – a couple more and I probably won't survive the night.*

*Our boss is pushing for us to continue with the experiments, despite the risks. He is terrified of what will happen to him if he can't report success to the higher-ups, and much as I want to, I can't even blame him for it. Each and every one of us got checked by the Committee for State Security before being assigned to this facility, and we all know the penalty for failure.*

*I have no idea how Division Y managed it. Supposedly they had years, decades even. I have only been allowed access to partial copies of the book we are using (which, despite what the political officers say, was clearly stolen from the Imperials and not 'found among the possession of the executed oppressors'), but the people I've talked to are clear that it isn't some centuries-old manuscript. It was made – printed – recently.*

*Even assuming that it is a collection of older records the Imperials managed to dig out from some forgotten archive, the sheer variety of rituals and spells in there (though they all share a clear central theme) is astonishing. If only we could properly take the time to study them in order, I think we could genuinely do a lot of good with it. But that's not what our masters want, and they have no patience for proper study – or, as they would call it, 'the natural laziness of the academic classes'.*

*Idiots, all of them. Well, no. They aren't all idiots. Uneducated, cruel and fanatical, to be sure, but not stupid. They wouldn't be as successful as they are if they were stupid. Or maybe*

*I'm just telling myself that to make being beaten by them in the Revolution feel less humiliating, and the entire Federation is actually led by a bunch of lucky morons with bestial cunning. Who knows. In any case, they are the ones with the guns, so we have to do what they say.*

*We are going to try something from further into the book on the next new moon. If we can't show results, the Commissariat will make us regret ever being born.*

*I don't expect that excuse will serve me well when I end up at the Pearly G*ates, but like everyone else here, I am too much of a coward to do anything else."

From the private writings of a researcher at the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People, February 24th, 1926 (thrown into a coal stove immediately after being written).

---

*"My efforts to locate the stolen artefact have, so far, failed to uncover anything of immediate use. It is clear that something has changed in recent weeks, however : my contacts have observed several individuals known to be mages, who were exiled to prison camps in Sildberia, returning to the capital under armed guard. While it is possible Jugashvili was spooked by tales of our Wunderwaffen into changing his stance on mage use in the Federation's Army, I think it more likely they have been recalled as part of whatever new organization is responsible for studying what was taken from Castle Schwartzstein.*

*Tracking down these mages seems to be my best chance of locating the Kindermärchen. I have spread their description among my network, and will also keep an ear out for any unusual supply movements. Still, I don't expect much result anytime soon : the Russy counter-intelligence has cracked down on all foreign activity upon its soil. At least three of my Imperial colleagues have disappeared in the last month, along with several others I strongly suspect to have been working for other powers – and, of course, at least ten times that number of entirely innocent Russy citizens. They were all arrested on 'suspicions of activities against the State in service of foreign interests', and I do not expect any of them will ever see the light of day again.*

*Listed below are the codenames of the Imperial operatives lost to this recent purge. Please see to informing their relatives in the Reich. It's a small thing, but it's all I can do for them now, and we all promised we'd do that much for each other should it come to this."*

Excerpt from an encrypted missive left in a dead drop west of Moskva by an Imperial Intelligence operative, February 26th, 1926.

---

Researcher 1 : *"Alright, it's still the new moon. We have only two more shots at this before needing to wait another month, so hopefully the results will be better this time than yesterday."*

Researcher 2 : *"It could hardly go worse, anyway. The cleaning team are still scrubbing the other location. The fact they keep puking isn't helping."*

Researcher 1 : *"Quiet. Final check, is everything ready ?"*

Researcher 3 : *"The circle has been drawn in silver as per the book's instructions. We have checked the sigils three times in the last hour and corrected a couple of minor imperfections found during the second check. Everything is fine now."*

Researcher 1 : *"Who did the first check and missed them ? Make sure they are punished. The General Secretary expects better from us."*

Researcher 3 : "… yes, Comrade."

Researcher 1 : *"Bring the mages in."*

*[Pained, fearful moans and quietly murmured protests.]*

Researcher 1 : *"Shut up ! You have all been granted a second chance at serving the People, despite your transgressions and participation in the Bourgeoisie's oppression. You should all be grateful. Take your places around the circle, one in each of the five square. Move along !"*

Researcher 3 : *"Everyone is in place. Beginning in three, two, one, now."*

*[Sounds of synchronized chanting from the five mages, slowly escalating to a crescendo.]*

Researcher 2 : *"For the purpose of the recording, the circle is starting to glow. The glow is intensifying. We have passed the mark where something went wrong yesterday."*

Researcher 1 : *"Good. Continue."*

*[The chanting reaches a fevered pitch, as the mages start screaming the words of the incantation. For several seconds, there is only white noise on the recording.]*

Researcher 1 : *"It ... it's done. The mages are still alive and appear unhurt, though they have all passed out. Medics, get in there and check on them."*

Researcher 2 : *"Mana emanations are stable. The ritual seems to have been successful : something has appeared within the circle. But ... what the hell is it ?"*

Researcher 3 : *"It looks like ... a leg ? That's definitely a hoof of some kind at the end there. But it's not connected to anything."*

Researcher 2 : *"So ... it worked. The book said this was supposed to [sound of pages ruffling] 'bring a piece of the Endless forth, that all may feast upon its bounty and grow strong from it'."*

Researcher 1 : *"Then I'll have to ask our superiors to send us some more re-educated volunteers."*

From the audio recording of the second iteration of experiment Matushka, performed by the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People on March 15th, 1926.

*"Our experiments on Object K, which was created as a result of the Matushka experiment, are going very well and show great promise for the Federation.*

*Every time we cut into Object K, it regrows the lost mass within seconds. This blatantly breaks the law of conservation of matter, implying that law may just be another example of Imperialist propaganda, meant to keep the People down by indoctrinating them into believing the scarcity of resources that led to their misery was an inherent part of existence.*

*After testing the effects of consumption of the meat obtained this way first on rats, then on non-mana-capable volunteers, we were able to establish that this meat, which we've called Izobiliya, does not have any harmful effects – much the opposite. Although the volunteers describe the Izobiliya as an 'acquired taste', it didn't take long for them to start devouring their assigned portions with gusto. According to our medical personnel, the volunteers, who have been eating nothing but Izobiliya for the past two weeks, show no sign of malnutrition or any kind of nutrient deficiency.*

*Therefore, the Institute has, in effect, discovered an infinite source of food. It is no surprise that the Imperial dogs chose to use this knowledge to create weapons of mass destruction instead of solving world hunger, as the power of the aristocracy has ever relied on their control of land, from which comes the food the People need to live. Yet, despite the tremendous potential of the Izobiliya, it is only one aspect of the results of the Matushka experiment.*

*In addition to the 'meat' of Object K, its 'blood' also possesses incredible abilities. While it can be drunk, we have found that injection directly into the bloodstream causes a quicker effect (and bypass the gagging reflex of most volunteers, as the liquid, for all its wondrous properties, tastes apparently quite foul).*

*Any sickness is healed within moments of the injection, including long-lasting diseases and injuries. During one test, the volunteer regrew a toe lost in an accident years ago : further experimentation revealed that the Panatseya can even regrow lost limbs, although the process is very painful (and the pain cannot be suppressed by medication or alcohol, as their numbing effects are cancelled by the Panatseya as well).*

*Repeated injections of Panatseya in healthy subjects, combined with a diet of Izobiliya, result in more permanent changes. Within a couple of weeks, the subjects display prodigious strength and speed, as well as the ability to regenerate even without further Panatseya injections. These, we believe, are the first true supersoldiers of the State, worthy of its greatness : the Leshy, whose loyalty to the Party is guaranteed by the slight diminishment of their intellectual faculties and their complete dependency on a steady diet of Izobiliya, as mundane food no longer suffices to sustain their enhanced metabolisms.*

*While our singular instance of Object K appears to be infinitely self-regenerating, there are technical limitations to how fast the bounty of the Party's ingenuity can be cut from a single source. We are ready to perform the Matushka experiment again, in order to increase production of Panatseya and Izobiliya for mass distribution."*

Excerpt from a report of the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People, April 26th, 1926.

---

*"Upon reviewing the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People's report on the Leshy, their deployment in the field has been approved. To guard against a possible Imperial decapitation strike using their own inferior supersoldiers, the first units to go through this process will be stationed in Moskva, under the command of the Committee for State Security, and tasked with the protection of the capital and the leaders of the State.*

*The Institute is to continue expanding the production of both Panatseya and Izobiliya, with the aim of converting as many as a hundred thousand soldiers to Leshy by the end of the year. A list of approved units will be compiled by the Commissariat, who will assist the experts of the Institute and assuage the worries and fears of any ill-informed soldier.*

*In addition, the production of Izobiliya must be industrialized to augment production to the point it can be used to ensure none of the State's children are left hungry, despite the machinations of foreign powers to prevent the Communist Utopia from reaching its true potential.*

*Finally, the Institute will continue researching the remaining contents of the tome liberated from the Imperials' greedy hands, in order to find new ways to make this lore serve the State."*

Excerpt from Order 207, signed into effect by General Secretary Josef Jugashvili on April 30th, 1926.

---

Researcher 1 : *"Everything ready ?"*

Researcher 2 : *"Yes. Each of the three mages ate Izobiliya for breakfast and they are raring to go."*

Researcher 1 : *"I'll bet."*

*[Sounds of synchronized chanting.]*

Researcher 3 : *"Everything is going fine so far. The circle is starting to glow – I told you getting the blood would be worth the paperwork."*

Researcher 1 : *"Yes, yes, we know. I'll make sure your name is mentioned in the report. But just not exploding isn't good enough."*

*[The chanting reaches a fevered pitch, before abruptly cutting off.]*

Researcher 2 : *"That's ... a lot of smoke. Activate the ventilation ... Alright. It's clearing up. Let's see what an 'agent of bounty and grace' looks like."*

*[Soft singing starts to be heard. There are no words to the song, but it is undeniably beautiful.]*

Researcher 2 : *"Is that ... is that a satyr ? I mean, it has horns, and its legs look like deer legs, don't they ?"*

Researcher 1 : *"Yes. It's ... it's beautiful ..."*

Researcher 3 : *"Are you smelling that ? It smells like ... like ..."*

*[Sounds of objects being dropped to the ground – including the recorder. Several minutes of undistinguishable noise, before a sudden chorus of scream, and the end of the recording.]*

From the audio recording of the first iteration of experiment Rebenok, performed by the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People on May 15th, 1926 (also the day of the recording's destruction, as well as the death of a third of the Institute's personnel).

---

*"Comrades,*

*All is well. The researchers are doing good work. The production of Panatseya and Izobiliya is increasing beyond our current predictions.*

*Soon no child of Russy shall ever know hunger or sickness again."*

Excerpt from a report written by the Commissars assigned to the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People, May 20th, 1926.

---

*"COMRADES REJOICE !*

*Thanks to the great ingenuity of the Party's brightest minds, the days of famine caused by the incompetent leadership of the bourgeoisie and the sabotage of the traitors to Communism and foreign agents, are over !*

*Through the power of Communist Science, our devoted Comrades have succeeded in creating a limitless source of meat, the Izobiliya. And by decree of the compassionate and loving General Secretary, this wonder will be made available to all the people of Moskva, and soon the entire Federation.*

*The Izobiliya contains all the nutrients needed for a body to stay strong in service to the State, and can be prepared in a variety of ways to add a little diversity to the plate of the dedicated worker !*

*To taste this miracle of Communism for yourself, all you need is to present yourself at one of the distribution centers listed below with your membership card of the Party, and you will be allowed to take away as much food as you can carry !*

*Eat all the food ? No problem ! You can come back the next day and get more !"*

Official public notice published across Moskva by the Office for the Public Good, May 27th, 1926.

*"The hour is almost at hand. The Summer solstice approaches, when the realm of the Dark Mother is closest to our benighted reality. Soon, She will walk among us.*

*By telling the Party's higher-ups that we were going to create another, larger instance of Object K near the capital in order to facilitate the logistics of distribution, they were all too willing to assist us in securing an appropriate ritual site. They even provided us with all the authority we needed to obtain the ritual components.*

*The Circlet of Life has been crafted in accordance to the sacred rites described in our holy book, each of its three parts – the circlet, the headpiece and the clasp – forged from the melted jewellery of slain aristocrats and the bones of those in the Institute who didn't embrace the Truth even as we forced Her flesh and blood down their ungrateful throats.*

*Our operatives have acquired the ancient ritual knife from the warehouse where it was stored along with the other possessions of its previous owner, a noble who had no idea of the true nature of the curio. Nobody questioned them once our converts from the Commissariat flashed their badges and claimed the items within were needed for the Good of the People.*

*The knife is exactly as the Mother's envoys described it to us, still resonating with the echoes of the wondrous deeds it was used in thousands of years ago, when last men were wise and blessed enough to worship in Her temples. As I held it in my hand, I felt the cold radiating from the bone blade (human bone, if I know my ivory, which I do), and felt as if I could hear the prayers of our ancestors in the distance.*

*It is a beautiful thing, and with it we will change the world.*

*Not as beautiful as the children of the Dark Mother we called into this world, of course. They have been safely smuggled to the ritual location, and provided with all the luxuries beings of their station deserve (which should keep them busy and stop them from wandering outside until the need for discretion has passed).*

*Thanks to our new influence, we were even able to secure a location to perform the ritual within the capital itself. Through our deliveries of Panatseya, we have gained access to all of Moskva's hospitals, and are ready to seize the infants we'll need for the Great Undertaking.*

*While some part of me still thinks their sacrifice is regrettable, I know that is only the remains of the false morality we were all taught speaking. Their blood will usher in a new era for all of Russy, while they all become one with the Mother, and will live forever within Her, granted endless rebirth in Her service. Such a thing is not to be feared nor mourned, but celebrated.*

*All the preparations are complete, and the only ones with any clue are either part of our congregation or blinded by their greed for the Mother's lesser gifts, while those with the power to conceivably stop us are half a continent away.*

*The people of Moskva have tasted the boons of the Mother, and now it is time for the seeds we have sown to bloom, that all may bask in Her glory."*

From a piece of paper left on the table of the Institute For The Subservience of Extranatural Affairs To The Good Of the People' mess room, June 20th, 1926.

---

*June 22nd, 1926 – Moskva*

Comrade Josef's first indicator that something was amiss was when the screams didn't stop.

Screaming was hardly uncommon in Moskva. Sure, most people had learned that it wouldn't help them by now, but the human instinct to make noise when you were in danger in an effort to get help was hard to suppress. So, when the Committee for State Security arrested someone in the streets on suspicions of anti-national activities, or when one of Loria's hunting parties found someone who suited their commander's depraved tastes, screaming was only to be expected.

However, this time the screams weren't abruptly stopping as their source was beaten into unconsciousness or otherwise silenced. And while Josef wasn't adverse to the sound of screaming – indeed, one of his favorite methods of relaxation was drinking a glass of alcohol while reminiscing on the screams of the enemies he had defeated on his path to absolute power in the Federation – this was beginning to get on his nerves.

He had been in the middle of some lovely daydreaming about the Federation's future now that the Institute had started producing results : an entire nation of strong, healthy, loyal workers, fed by an endless flow of Izobiliya. With no more need for agriculture, he and those he chose to keep their full intellect would be able to truly industrialize the country on a scale undreamt of by the corrupt capitalists. They would built a perfect utopia, one which would spread across the world, until all were united under one rule – his rule.

But the screams had disturbed that wonderful vision, and he was starting to get angry.

"What is all that ruckus about ?" he grunted after several minutes of the screams only growing louder.

Irritated, he got up and started walking toward the window of his office, which was both reinforced and barred. He was halfway there when the ground suddenly shook, with enough strength to throw him to the floor, where he laid for nearly an entire minute, until the earthquake subsided. Thankfully, no one had seen him in such a disgraceful position, so he wouldn't need to have any of his aides or guards executed to ensure their silence – he so disliked having to train their replacements.

Standing up, Josef resumed his trip to the window, glass shards cracking under his boots, and pulled the curtains away. The screaming had only intensified, and as he looked upon Liberation Square, he finally saw why.

There, right in front of the Kremlin, people were running, chased by black shapes that moved too quickly for him to get a good look at them. There was smoke in the distance – something was on fire.

What the hell ? This wasn't someone resisting arrest like he'd first thought, or even a riot. This was something else entirely, he knew it in his bones, but what, he had no idea.

Josef couldn't say how long he simply stood there, gaping as he watched chaos spread across his domain. Then the door to his office banged open, and he jumped around, hand moving to the gun at his hip. It stayed there when it saw it was Loria, the leader of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The small, fat man was sweating heavily, and the squad of guards behind him looked equally afraid.

For a fleeting moment, Josef wondered if this was a coup, if Loria had somehow managed to get the support needed to overthrow him and this whole madness outside was nothing but a distraction. But he discarded the notion immediately. No one in his inner circle would prefer Loria to him as supreme leader of the Federation : Loria's character and habits were just too repulsive. It was the main reason Josef trusted him with control of the Commissariat.

"Comrade Secretary !" gasped Loria. "I'm glad to have found you. We need to leave, now !"

"Loria ? What is going on ?" asked Josef.

"I don't know, but we aren't safe. There are – well, I don't know what they are, but dangerous elements appear to have infiltrated the capital. Some kind of ploy by our Imperialist enemies, no doubt. We need to get you to safety !"

Josef hadn't survived through the Revolution, the Civil War and more assassination attempts than he cared to remember by being slow to take action when required. There would be time to figure out what exactly had happened, and who to punish for it, later. Preserving his own skin was more important at the moment.

"Alright, let's move," he grunted. "We will regroup in the underground tunnels and see if we can figure out what's going on. You have called for the Army to come in ? If this is an Imperial attack, then we need the Leshy units in the city right now."

"I don't know," admitted Loria, sounding as frustrated with the whole situation as Josef felt. "The radio isn't working, apparently."

"Brilliant," muttered Josef, and then they were running through the Kremlin, toward the nearest passage leading to the underground tunnels.

As they filed in through the narrow entrance, an inhuman shriek echoed across the entire Kremlin. Everyone froze for a second, then they heard the sound of heavy footsteps, becoming louder and louder.

"Stay here and deal with whatever that was !" shouted Loria. The soldiers hesitated, then remembered what either of their two charges could order done to their families if they disobeyed, and turned to face the source of the noise.

Meanwhile, Josef and Loria went down the stairs into the tunnels and kept running. There were rooms deep in the tunnels which had been prepared to serve as bunkers in case of emergencies, with power generators, food and water where someone could hole up for weeks

if necessary, and whose reinforced doors could withstand an attack spell (or at least that's what the architects had promised Josef).

They were maybe two hundred meters from their starting point (Loria wasn't much of a runner, even with fear pushing him) when terrified screams and gunfire reached them. The fight only lasted for a few seconds before quieting down – and, somehow, Josef didn't think his incompetent guards had managed to take down their attacker.

Josef didn't hesitate. He drew his pistol and shot Loria in the knee, before turning and running, leaving the head of the Commissariat to slow their pursuer down, ignoring his cries of pain and pleas for help. Loria had been a valuable subordinate, but nothing was more important than preserving his own life, and the other man would only have slowed him down anyway.

He ran, silently (he wasn't going to waste his breath) cursing himself for letting himself get out of shape since his takeover of the largest country in the world. In his youth, this wouldn't have been nearly as tiring, but now he was starting to feel tired after only a couple minutes of running –

He stopped right after the tunnel took a sharp turn to the left. The passage was blocked a few meters ahead : the ceiling had caved in, and something which resembled a cross between black roots and pulsating veins had completely filled the space.

Josef was about to turn back and take his chances finding another path through the tunnels when he heard breathing coming from behind him, and the sound of footsteps on the concrete floor – and these were not human footsteps, he was sure of it. The smell of it reached him first, and he had to keep himself from emptying his stomach as fear froze him in place. The smell was flowery and musky, sweet and bitter at the same time.

The thing, whatever it was, stopped. Then it spoke, in a chorus of several voices that were in perfect unison :

***"Turn around, Comrade. Look at me."***

Slowly, as if trapped in a nightmare from which he couldn't wake up, Josef turned back and saw the beast which had hunted him down the evacuation tunnels.

It was huge, needing to bend to fit into the tunnel. Its skin was black and leathery, parts of it shining under the illumination of the lightbulbs placed at regular interval on the ceiling, others covered in short fur and drying red blood. Four long limbs with too many joints, each ending in a clawed, disturbingly human-seeming hand, grew from a torso covered in a dozen teats that were leaking a pink fluid. Each pair of teats was separated from the rest by another bestial mouth from which purple-black tongues lapped at the horror's own milk in a grotesque cycle of self-feeding.

But as hideous as its body was, it was its face, draped in a mane of long red hair, which draw the gaze of the General Secretary. Its eyes were slit horizontally, like those of the goats Josef remembered seeing during his childhood in the countryside. But no goat, no matter how

smart his owner claimed it was, had ever possessed the spark of intellect he saw in the four black-and-gold orbs that stared back at him from atop the creature's wolfish muzzle.

To his own horror, Josef found that his body was reacting to the monster's presence, drawn to it despite its hideousness.

***"Comrade General Secretary,"*** it said. ***"Why are you not happy ? Mother Russy is here. She will guide all her children to greatness. The People will be made anew, stronger and better than ever."***

"What are you ?" he managed to say between clattering teeth.

***"You don't recognize me, Comrade ?"*** It cocked its head to the side. ***"I am Natasha. Mother Russy's daughter, herald, and carrier."***

'Natasha' ? He recognized that name. It was hardly uncommon in Russy, but he remembered seeing it on the report about the book stolen from the Imperials – the very book which the Institute had used to … make … the …

Oh.

This wasn't the Imperials' doing at all, was it ? This was the Institute's work. These despicable vermin he'd pulled out of the lageri had betrayed him and unleashed this … this abomination upon Moskva. He knew he shouldn't have let them live after the initial purges, shouldn't have brought them back, even to find defenses against the Reich's Wunderwaffen. He should have trusted in steel and machines, rather than run back to the bourgeoisie's occult methods.

***"At last you understand,"*** the monster crooned with its many mouths, before rising its left … hand ? Paw ? Whatever it was, it held a haunch of bleeding meat in it, which Josef recognized as raw, unprocessed Izobiliya. He hadn't touched the stuff himself, of course – he didn't need to, someone of his rank being granted access to the best food in the entire Federation. ***"Will you not eat of Her flesh ? Will you not drink of Her blood ? Will you not join Mother's children ? There is a place at Her feet waiting for you. This is all thanks to you, after all. Why did you not partake of Her bounty, even as you led so many others to Her embrace ?"***

"I," he spat, anger briefly – so briefly – rising to surpass his horror, "serve no one !"

***"So be it,"*** it growled. It didn't sound angry, nor even disappointed. If anything, Josef fancied it sounded … pleased ? ***"Then your flesh will serve as sustenance for Her children."***

Josef raised his gun, but it was knocked out of his hand with a desultory swipe of the creature's claws, which also ripped his arm to bloody ribbons. He screamed, first in shock, then in agony as the pain of the injury hit him.

It took several minutes for Comrade Josef Jugashvili, General Secretary of the Russy Federation and architect of years of systematic oppression and terror across the country's vast expanse, to finally die. The creature which had once been Agent Natasha took her time in

devouring him alive, and long before he finally bled out, he begged for a chance to change his mind and serve the Dark Mother in any way She desired, tears running down his face even as other liquids ran down his legs.

But the Dark Mother granted no second chance to those who refused Her generosity. She hardly granted any first chances at all.

---

*"If you found this recording, RUN. Go West, toward the Reich, and don't stop to read the rest until you are safe behind the guns of the Eastern Army. Then call Division Y and tell them everything they have must be sent to the East as soon as they can, and pray that it will be enough.*

*I am recording this while riding away from Moskva as far as my legs and this bicycle will carry me on what passes for a road in the Federation. I don't think anyone will check the dead drop I intend to leave this message in, but just in case, here is what I know :*

*Moskva is lost. Everyone still in the city is either a monster, dead, or will soon be one of the two. I don't know how or why it happened, but I suspect that mystery meat which was made available to everyone last month. Mercifully, I remembered Division Y's warnings and stayed well away from it apart from my attempt to secure a sample to send back to the Fatherland, but everyone I knew who partook vanished when things went mad. As I ran out of my apartment building, I saw broken doors from homes of people I know had eaten from it, and they were broken from the inside.*

*It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together and understand where the monsters are coming from. There are thousands, tens of thousands – hundreds ? – of them in the Russy capital at the very least. I can't describe what they look like in detail, because I didn't risk getting close to them, but they resemble beasts and men, mixed together in a most unholy fashion. They are hunting people, either killing and eating them or dragging them elsewhere for God knows what purpose. I also suspect that these monsters, or at least some of them, possess some kind of mind-controlling effect similar to that displayed by the Eikons in Ildoa and Bovariastadt.*

*On one occasion, I saw them approach a group of survivors who inexplicably laid down their weapons before following them, like cattle being driven to the slaughterhouse by nightmarish sheepdogs. Guns don't do anything to them, and the high-caliber weapons I saw a squad of the Federation's Army use against them barely slowed them down before they overran the poor bastards.*

*In addition to the monsters, Moskva is overrun with some kind of strange, black vine that grows at impossible speed. I saw with my own eyes a growth snake up around an entire building in the time it took me to run down a street, before crushing it to pieces along with everyone trapped inside.*

*But the monsters and the carnivorous vegetation aren't the problem – or at least, not the main problem. I trust that Division Y can handle them, just as they have handled every creature conjured by the enemies of the Reich since the Great War really began. It's the Dark Mother that terrifies me most for the future of the Empire. I don't know how I know its name, but I do,*

*God help me. It is a giant thing, towering over the tallest buildings of Moskva. Its sin-black bulk is so large that it blots out the sun. It bleats with a thousand mouths full of flat, herbivore teeth, and I can still hear it even now, dozens of kilometers away –*

*I am losing my mind. May God protect the Reich. May God protect us all.*

*May God protect me –*

*[Sounds of bestial growls, impact, then screaming, before the recording ends.]"*

Unencrypted recording, abandoned on the side of a road to the West of the Russy Federation's capital, next to a pile of human bones covered in tooth-marks, June 22nd, 1926.

---

*"Today at approximately 10 in the morning, every instance of Project W on Castle grounds suddenly shifted to their war-form, regardless of their surroundings, and started screaming – including those whose biology would normally make such a thing impossible.*

*In each case, it took several moments for them to calm down, and there was some damage caused in several cases, though thankfully no one was hurt apart from the Werwölfe themselves, who promptly regenerated. Upon interrogating them to ascertain the cause of this display, they unanimously declared that the eldritch entities with which their human essence are fused suddenly experienced a great moment of atavistic terror, which overcame even the strongest-willed among them. Upon asking them what the source of that terror was, they were unable to provide clear answers, but all of them pointed to the East as the source of it.*

*The Untoten felt a similar disturbance, though their reaction to it was much less violent than the Werwölfe. The Puppen, however, fell unconscious (using the term loosely), apart from Evelyn, the first of their number, who claimed that she 'couldn't sleep, as [she] needs to take care of Gehrman'.*

*The Professor is currently working on coaxing the rest of his creations awake : they are all still alive, but appear to hide within their shells out of fear. He is convinced that their return to active service is only a matter of time; until then, we have sent orders for the instances of Projekt P which were sent to the Eastern border (and which, as far as we have been able to ascertain, suffered the same fate) to be brought back to Castle Schwartzstein with all haste.*

*It is clear that something has gone terribly, horribly wrong in the East. This, I fear, is what the Director has been worried about these last few months. We can only hope that our preparations will prove equal to the task."*

From a report of Division Y, written at Castle Schwartzstein, June 22nd, 1926.

---

*June 23rd, 1926 – Kingdom of Ildoa – Unified States Military Base*

Nicol Teslus frowned as he looked at his instrument's readings. He had checked his calculations three times, and the device itself ten. Yet the results refused to change, meaning that he had to admit they were telling the truth, however unwelcome it might be.

Well then. This … this wasn't good. Actually, scratch that : it was an absolute bloody disaster.

"Excuse me ?" he called out. "Yes, you there. Come here, please."

One of the aides running around across the field laboratory of Research Group 51 rushed to Nicol's side. He had to admit, there was something satisfying to seeing someone respond to him so quickly.

"Yes, sir ?"

"Could you get me General Hutton, please ? Unless I'm mistaken, something has happened that I think he'll want to be informed of."

"… are we in danger ?" asked the aide, looking a lot more nervous. "Should we evacuate the base ?"

"Hmm ? Oh, no," Nicol replied absent-mindedly, before adding : "Well, we don't need to evacuate the base. Not yet, at least. I'm afraid we are in danger, though. Tremendous danger, as a matter of fact, but evacuating won't make us any safer. I'm not sure running all the way back to the States would be enough, to be frank. That's why I need to talk to the General. Now hurry up, please."

"I … very well. I'll get the General right away."

Nicol watched the aide walk out of the workshop at a brisk pace (nobody ran inside the workshop, not if they were smart, and much to the inventor's quiet joy, everyone in Research Group 51 was smart in some way or another). Then he turned back to his workbench, clearing it and putting a fresh sheet of paper on it.

"Right then," he mused to himself as he pulled a fresh pen out of the box. "Now, how can I explain to the good General in terms he will understand that the Apocalypse is upon us, and that our only hope to stop it may be to join forces with the very people we were sent here to keep in check ?"

---

*"Thousands of Russy refugees are fleeing through the border. Despite our initial fears, this is not an invasion : these people are all civilians, and there are many women and children among them. The first arrived at the border two days ago, having managed to acquire mechanical transportation, but the vast majority are on foot – strangely, none of them are using animal-powered vehicles.*

*According to our translators (who, by the way, would appreciate reinforcements to help deal with the flow of civilians, only a tiny fraction of whom speak Imperial), they are fleeing from hordes of monsters rampaging across the Federation. Most of these monsters, they claim, are coming from the East, but others are apparently being birthed by farm and wild animals, all of whom have been driven into a frenzy and attack all humans on sight. Even here on the border, our horses have been thoroughly spooked since the 22nd, and we've had to put down more than a quarter of their number.*

*We have set up lines of evacuation to move them to nearby Imperial villages and cities, and organized humanitarian efforts to provide them with shelter and supplies. There's been some grumbling from the civilian population at the presence of these unexpected visitors, but nothing we cannot handle with a few carefully orchestrated leaks regarding what we think is going on in the Federation.*

*This is most likely related to the phenomenon reported by every mage deployed on the Eastern border on the 22nd, and the threat foretold by Division Y. At the advice of the Division's representatives, we have sent scouting parties, both aerial mages and on foot, to learn more about the nature of the threat. As of yet, none of them have returned, but that is to be expected, as it has only been a handful of hours since their departure by the time of this message's sending.*

*I am aware that doing so without the authorization of Berun might be regarded as breaching the treaties between the Reich and the Federation, but given the involvement of Mythos weaponry, I made the decision that time was of the essence and acted on my own authority. Should High Command decide that my actions were in error, I ask that I alone bear the responsibility for them, as my subordinates were only following my orders."*

Excerpt from a top-priority transmission from the headquarters of the Eastern Imperial Army to Central Headquarters, June 30th, 1926.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Well, I did promise that the Federation's dabbling with the Mythos would make the Beast Scourge of Yharnam look like a mild flu. Do you think I succeeded ?

Fun fact : according to my admittedly cursory research, in 1926, Moscow's population was around 2 million people (apparently the Soviets did a census just that year : isn't that convenient ?). Our poor Imperial spy didn't get to see all of the disaster while running for his life.

Six months might seem like a short time for the Federation to mess things up that badly, but with the Institute already existing by the time Natasha shambled back to the Federation with the Kindermärchen, the Federation's leadership not-so-secretely terrified of the Wunderwaffen and pushing for quick results, and the fact that a high-Class entity manipulated the whole thing, I feel it works.

I based my portrayal of Josef Jugashvili on how he is portrayed in the official English translation of the Youjo Senki novels. If you have read the novels, and would have enjoyed seeing Loria's death on-screen, I thought he didn't deserve such an honor and had him unceremoniously disposed of by dear Natasha on her way to the General Secretary.

The inspiration for this chapter was the scenario "Mom's Coming To Visit" (yes, that is what the authors called it) from the CthulhuTech book Damnation View - specifically, what happens if the player characters fail catastrophically in preventing the cultists' ritual and Shub-Niggurath manifests in the Northwest of the United States.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and look forward to your thoughts and reactions. Especially your theories as to what is going on with Teslus in that last scene, but I am also open to suggestions on how this new stage of the Great War will unfold from a strategic perspective, or ideas for "unit types" for the Progeny (which is the name I'm giving to the Dark Mother's horde of monsters).

Next : reactions, scouting, and diplomacy in the shadow of the End Times.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*CALAMITY STRIKES IN MOSKVA !*

*Two days ago, on the day of the Summer Solstice, a great malaise swept over the nation, leaving us shaken and knowing, without being able to explain how, that something terrible had happened. At the same time, mana detection arrays thorough the Empire and beyond picked up a sudden surge of mana within the Russy Federation, and aetheric disruptions have continued ever since.*

*Now, we know the cause of this disturbance, and the truth is more terrible than any of us could have imagined. Brigadier General Zettour gave a press conference earlier today, where he revealed that the Russy Federation had, in its efforts to replicate the Reich's Wunderwaffen, accidentally doomed Moskva, its capital city by unleashing upon it an entity similar in power to the one which manifested in the Holy See six months ago. Unfortunately, the Federation Army wasn't as prepared for this as the Imperial Army, and the entire population of Moskva is now believed lost to the uncontrolled horror.*

*Our correspondents in Moskva, whose job was already difficult and dangerous due to the authoritative nature of the Federation, haven't responded to our attempts to get in touch. Our hopes and prayers are with them, that, if they couldn't escape in time, their lives might at least have ended quickly.*

*According to Brigadier General Zettour, the zone affected by the Solstice Event is still increasing in size, threatening the population of all of Western Russy, up to the borders of the Reich itself. Already, thousands of terrified Russy civilians have fled their homeland, seeking to escape the monsters created by their government even if it means taking refuge in an Empire that the Federation's propaganda has painted as being ruled by bloodthirsty tyrants for years now. Our contacts in the region have confirmed this to be true, as refugees are being directed to Imperial villages and cities, in what may be the largest coordinated humanitarian efforts in the history of the Reich.*

*In the last few months, a lot of military activity was observed on the Eastern border of the Reich. At the time, it was widely believed (and indeed, reported as such by this very publication) that these troop movements were done in response to the possibility of Russy aggression, possibly triggered by the Federation's higher-ups fearing the might of the Wunderwaffen.*

*Now, we must wonder whether our leaders knew that something was going to happen. Though if this were the case, then it seems even they didn't foresee the scale of the catastrophe, as the military bases of the Eastern Army are reportedly abuzz with activity, and there have been multiple delays announced on the local railway. Which, several years into the Great War, all Imperial citizens will recognize as a sign that a lot of military cargo is being shifted across the region by train.*

*Regardless, we hope that the might of the Imperial Army, which, with the help of its Wunderwaffen, has triumphed over every challenge it has faced thus far, will be able to continue protecting the Fatherland from the darkness that has devoured Moskva …*

Excerpt from the front page of the Berun Post, June 24th, 1926.

---

*"Since the infiltration of Castle Schwartzstein, the Federation doubled down on its hunt for foreign agents, but we still had a few operatives in the capital and its surroundings. Key word being, 'had'. As far as we can tell, every single one of them is dead or worse, and the same is true for the agents of the Unified States, the Reich, and any of the other countries with an interest in the Federation's affairs.*

*Mages were able to detect the spike in mana from Moskva all the way to the mainland. In fact, based on what our friends over the Atlantic are telling us,* every *mage,* everywhere*, could feel it. Never in our entire recorded history has something like this happened.*

*We first suspected the Empire of having deployed a Wunderwaffe to remove the threat of the Federation, since the country was the only remaining obstacle to Europan hegemony. But such a course of action goes against the behavior the Empire has shown thus far in the use of its superweapons. In addition, the fact that the Federation successfully stole valuable information from Division Y several months ago, and the last reports of our spies about the 'miracle food' which was freely distributed in Moskva, make the theory that the Solstice Event was caused by the Federation mishandling Elder Magic a much more plausible scenario.*

*[...]*

*Since the Communist Revolution of over a decade ago, the Federation has moved toward an extremely centralized form of government, despite the obvious downsides of such an approach given the sheer size of its territory. Power and authority were all based in Moskva, where they could be watched by Jugashvili's secret police for any sign of disloyalty.*

*We can only guess as to what the political landscape of Russy will end up looking like, assuming there is still a Russy left to worry about. In any case, as a united nation, the Russy Federation has effectively ceased to exist. Doubtless there are still pockets of resistance, and the sheer size of the Federation means that entire regions many times the size of Albion will remain untouched for weeks, if not months. But without Moskva and the threat of the Federation Army to impose order and unity, it is very likely that, even should every monster spawned by the Federation's careless meddling suddenly drop dead, the country would fracture into dozens of smaller ethnic states."*

Internal memo of the Albish Secret Services, June 25th, 1926.

---

*June 26th, 1926 – Londinium*

Prime Minister Churbull, Duke of Marlborough and First Lord of the Admiralty, sat at his desk, chewing on a cigar.

The letter in front of him had been sent by Brigadier General Zettour, who by now was more or less in supreme command of the Imperial Army together with his colleague Rudersdorf. It had been delivered by the Foreign Office, who had been in talks with their Imperial equivalent to discuss the matter of that assassination attempt their mages had made on Colonel Lergen in Remula, right after Zettour's press conference.

To put it bluntly, Zettour had had enough of Albion's meddling into the Great War. The Brigadier General was aware that the Allied Kingdom wasn't directly responsible for the Solstice Event, but their attempts to infiltrate the headquarters of Division Y had definitely helped the Federation in acquiring the lore they'd then used to destroy themselves in such a spectacular fashion. Now millions of people were dead, and all of Europa was at risk – not to mention Asia as well, once the influence of whatever it was that had destroyed Moskva reached the Far East.

Zettour had announced that, from this moment onward, the Imperial Army would perform operations within the Federation's territory, both to gather intelligence and to provide assistance to the Russy population, who were fleeing from the monsters their government had unleashed. If Albion so much as raised a diplomatic protest over this, or otherwise interfered in the Reich's efforts to salvage the situation and prevent the apocalypse, then the gloves would come off. The Royal Wizard, who was still in Imperial custody, would be shot like a dog to start with; then Zettour would order Division Y to break out the Wunderwaffen which had previously been considered too dangerous to use. By the time they were done, nothing would remain of Albion but slag and the echoes of terrified screams.

Zettour claimed that he would take no pleasure from this (which Churbull was inclined to believe, given his track record), but if this was what it took to keep the Albish from meddling with the Empire's efforts to save the world, then he would give the order regardless.

In short, 'Stay out of the way or we will kill you'. They had finally found the limits of Imperial High Command's politeness, Churbull thought ruefully.

Next to the letter were the latest reports of the Secret Services and the mage corps. Every mana detection array in the entire bloody world had picked up on what had happened in Moskva, as far as the Unified States. And even now, there were still disturbances, which had forced the engineers to recalibrate their devices to ignore that particular signature if they were to still be able to do their job.

It seemed it was Churbull's destiny to go down in History as the Prime Minister who'd overseen the fall of the Allied Kingdom from its comfortable position as a world power. When it got out that the Albish Secret Services had been involved in the Solstice Event, their already battered reputation would go down the toilet. Kemet was poised to claim its independence the moment the Great War ended, and Bharat wasn't going to be far behind.

At this point, if the country still existed by the time he retired (or was thrown in jail or executed, which honestly wasn't looking too unlikely), he would consider himself satisfied. It was clear now that he had badly underestimated the threat of the Wunderwaffen, thinking of them merely as incredibly powerful magical technology, whereas they were in a class of their own entirely. Sure, the Round Table bore most of the blame for how Albion had consistently

misstepped since joining the war, but there was only so much shifting responsibility you could do when you were Prime Minister.

Churbull considered his options. He wasn't going to risk Zettour's wrath, that much was certain. They could just sit still and wait, of course. If the Empire won (and considering what they had pulled thus far, Churbull wasn't going to bet against it, and not just because of the consequences should the Imperials fail), maybe it would be sufficiently weakened for Albion to be in a better position in the ensuing peace negotiations. Especially with the sheer devastation caused by uncontrolled Elder Magic : the entire world was going to push for strict regulations, if not an outright ban (and only because the latter wasn't going to fly with the Empire).

There was still that whole affair with the 'Not-Man' to worry about, but by now Churbull was convinced the Round Table had been completely wrong about that, seeing an ancient conspiracy where there hadn't been one. And if you dismissed the theory that the Empire was being manipulated from the shadows by an immortal wizard seeking to conquer the world, then the Allied Kingdom still had Merlin's apprentices, trained in the use of the Kemetian wards. Those were the country's last card in the field of Elder Magic : thankfully, they still worked even with the Ancient Kemetian relics lost during the Royal Wizard's raid on Remula. And they also had most of their mage corps, too, along with a bunch of ships cowering in their ports, terrified of the Imperial Kraken.

Compared to the might of the Imperial Army and Division Y, it wasn't much, admittedly. And yet …

"What the hell," the Prime Minister of the Allied Kingdom said out loud. "It won't be an easy sell, either to the Lords or the Imps, that's for sure. But if this is the Apocalypse, then we might as well go down fighting instead of waiting for someone else to decide the fate of the world."

Yes, he thought, that should go down nicely. And if it ended up restoring some of Albion's lost prestige, well, that'd just be a nice bonus, wouldn't it ?

---

*June 30th, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

As a career military officer and member of High Command during the largest conflict the Reich had ever known, Rudersdorf was used to meetings where the fate of his country hung in the balance. He was, however, getting tired of meetings where the fate of the world was at stake. Ever since Division Y had revealed the existence of Mythos magic and introduced it to modern warfare, his blood pressure had kept steadily increasing, to the point his doctor had started openly advising him to retire. Which Rudersdorf would love to do, as soon as the Great War was over and the safety of the planet his country and grandchildren were located on was assured.

For now, though, the Reich needed him to serve, and he would answer the call of duty.

They were meeting in the same room where they'd discussed the Ildoan invasion and the theft of the Kindermärchen grimoire. Zettour was here, of course, and so was Lergen, who was

doing an impressive job at hiding how completely exhausted he must be feeling. The Colonel had spent the last seven days working non-stop to grease the wheels of bureaucracy and infrastructure in order to make sure everything the Eastern Army could possibly need arrived to the border just that little bit faster. His reputation as the conqueror of Remula had helped, but Rudersdorf knew he had gone through almost his entire stock of Ildoan coffee he had brought back with him from his time in the peninsula.

Degurechaff wasn't here in the flesh, being too busy managing the transfer of Division Y's latest work to the Eastern Army, as well as standing guard over the Reich's border with the Federation in person. Even now, after all this time, the idea that this tiny wisp of a girl was a strategic asset in the defense of the Fatherland stuck in Rudersdorf's craw.

Instead, the Director was here as a magical projection cast by the mage assigned to Zettour precisely for that purpose. The projection was still just as disturbing no matter how many times Rudersdorf saw it, Degurechaff's half-starry image reminding him of the terrible price the girl had paid in her service to the Reich. But the discomfort it caused him paled compared to what they were discussing.

*"The creature responsible for the Solstice Event is a Class Nine Mythos entity called the Dark Mother,"* said Degurechaff once the niceties were done.

"How do you know its name ?" asked Rudersdorf.

*"We checked the notes on the Kindermärchen for anything resembling this scenario and found a reference to a summoning ritual that could lead to what we are observing,"* the Major replied. *"Also, everyone who gets within less than a hundred kilometers of Moskva instinctively knows it."*

"How terrifying," calmly commented Zettour. "I assume these scouts have been checked for any sign of indoctrination or anything similar ?"

*"Of course, General. I checked them over myself. So far, they're all clean. Shaken, but clean. While it's obvious that this strain of the Mythos is capable of corrupting human beings into its thralls, the vector of the corruption seems to be wholly biological in this instance."*

"Speaking of," said Rudersdorf. "Is there any way to save the people who were transformed ?"

Degurechaff shook her head. *"No, General. It would be like bringing the dead back to life, after their corpse has been eaten and digested by animals. Which, given my line of work, I'm forced to admit might actually be possible, but we don't have any method of doing so at the time."*

And just like that, the last hope of saving two million people quietly disappeared. Two million people. Not soldiers, not enemy combatants, but civilians, whose only crime had been to live under the iron fist of a tyrannical regime. And that was a conservative estimate : no doubt the real number of casualties was much higher, and getting higher all the time as the Progeny spread over Russy. It was enough to make Rudersdorf want to scream, but he forced

himself to remain calm by reminding himself of his duty to the Fatherland. Besides, he could do a lot more to help by thinking clearly than if he went mad.

"The Federation had its own troops stationed near the border, just like us. What happened to them ?"

*"Based on the civilians we debriefed, when the Solstice Event happened, they were summoned to the capital to help deal with the threat. By now, all of them are probably dead. I suppose there might be some survivors if they ran fast enough."*

"All of them ?!" Lergen was aghast. "The Federation Army is – was – several times the size of our own !"

*"Oh, the entire Federation Army didn't go to Moskva. I was talking about all the units which responded to the call. From the radio communications we've intercepted, the remaining Russy troops are gathering in Josefgrad, to the south-east of Moskva, and trying to establish some kind of stronghold against the Progeny. It … it isn't going well."*

Rudersdorf could well imagine it. If there was one thing the Great War had demonstrated, it was how difficult it was for even the most elite conventional armed forces to stand up against the Mythos unsupported, and the Federation Army was far from being elite. That they were fighting at all instead of breaking and running was testament to the discipline instilled into the Federation troops by their overseers – or, more charitably, the courage shown by those who fought to defend their home from monsters.

"We cannot allow this to continue," said Zettour. "Major Degurechaff, you told us about the possibility of such a disaster since the Russy spy stole the Kindermärchen from Castle Schwartzstein. Do you have a plan to deal with this crisis ?"

*"Yes."* Oh thank God. *"But it won't be easy. Completely cleansing Russy from the Progeny is going to be the work of years, if not decades, but if we don't cut off the infection at its source, then it is impossible."*

"So what you're saying is that we need to kill this 'Dark Mother'," deduced Lergen. "It has stayed inside Moskva so far, correct ?"

*"Yes, but that doesn't make it any less dangerous,"* said Degurechaff. *"Unlike the Ivory Blasphemy our forces faced in the Holy See under your command, Colonel, the Dark Mother's summoning was completed without interference or haste. We are unsure whether the entire entity made it through to our reality, or if this is merely an avatar of Being K, the entity responsible for the successful theft of the Kindermärchen. For all intents and purposes, however, this makes no difference. The longer the entity is on Earth, the more dangerous the situation becomes, as it warps all life around it to create more Progeny."*

"Then what do you need to stop it ?" asked Rudersdorf.

She told them. It was fortunate, thought the Brigadier General, that these days the three officers in the room more or less controlled the entire Imperial Army, thanks to their various triumphs in the Great War and influence over Division Y.

And even then, this was going to be a lot of paperwork, since Degurechaff's answer could basically be summed up in one word :

'Everything.'

---

*July 1st, 1926 – Contested Territory of Manchuria – Federation Army Command Center*

Commander Zhenkov, chief officer of the Federation Army in its ongoing war against the Akitsushima Dominion, looked at the messenger who stood in his command tent, looking very, very nervous.

Zhenkov had been dispatched here, thousands of kilometers away from Moskva and the centers of power, to end the humiliating conflict with the Dominion. It turned out that purging your military of nearly every high-ranking officer and sending all your aerial mages to their deaths, either in doomed combat operations or by 'transferring' them to the lergi, resulted in an effectively crippled military that struggled to win against the armed forces of an island nation which, until only a few decades ago, had been laughably behind the rest of the world.

The Akitsushiman mages alone were a nightmare to deal with, despite the computation orbs they used being far inferior to the ones which had been used in the Great War of Europa. Every base and convoys needed to be protected by concentrated anti-air firepower, and there was only so much of that to go around.

There was not enough food, not enough guns, not enough ammo. The only thing that there was plenty of was soldiers, who might as well be growing on fucking trees in Comrade Josef's glorious Federation for all the care with which they were spent.

And now, just as they had started to make progress (in great part thanks to Zhenkov's new tactics, though it wouldn't do to say it out loud and take credit for the inevitable triumph of Communism's warriors against the decadent imperialistic Dominion), this happened.

"It's confirmed, then ?" he asked.

"Yes, Commander," replied the young man. "No one has gotten any word from Moskva since the Solstice. And nobody who went to investigate returned, with their last radio communications being screams and warnings not to follow them, or pleas for assistance. The surviving units are retreating to Josefgrad, but there are already monsters in the streets there as well."

"This man is lying," said the political officer who stood apart from the rest of the gathered officers. "This is clearly a capitalistic ploy to –"

As the Commissar started ranting, Zhenkov saw the messenger pale, fear plain on his face. He knew exactly what awaited him, because there was no higher crime in the Federation than giving bad news to one's superior. Which, really, told you everything you needed to know about the state of the country before the Solstice Event.

But now … now there was no more Commissariat, no more omnipresent organization standing ready to punish the smallest infraction with exile or death, was there ?

All that was left was the handful of political officers who had been assigned to the East, and most of them hadn't been sent here because of their stellar performance in whatever passed for the Commissariat's internal politics. The one in Zhenkov's tent was the exception : someone tasked with monitoring a Commander like him needed to be unquestionably loyal to their distant masters, after all. But apart from him, the Commissars had been fighting along the troops against the Dominion for years, and they knew the score.

As the Commissar's rant reached a fevered pitch, getting to a lengthy and detailed description of the punishment he felt the messenger's entire family deserved for his attempt to spread lies within the People's Federation's glorious army, Zhenkov made a split-second decision. Without taking his gaze off the messenger, he smoothly drew his service pistol with his right hand and shot the Commissar in the head, silencing him.

Complete silence fell on the tent in the shot's aftermath and the sound of the body hitting the ground. The messenger and the other officers stared at Zhenkov and the corpse of the Commissar, shocked. It was hardly the first time a Commissar had been shot by a member of the Federation Army, but the sheer brazenness of Zhenkov's act had caught them all by surprise.

"Well, that's got it done," said the Commander, masking any doubt and fear he felt with the ease of long practice. He knew that, as long as he didn't show weakness or hesitation, they would follow his lead, and indeed, after a few more exchanged glances, they all rallied and ignored the corpse of the political officer. "Now, let's get to business, comrades. As far as we know, we are currently the largest military force left to the Federation, and all of our direct superiors just got eaten by some kind of unholy monstrosity. What do we do ?"

He carefully didn't say that this left him as the highest-ranking officer of possibly the entire Federation Army, and certainly the forces present in the Manchuria theatre, but the men in front of him had survived the political games of the Federation Army long enough to hear it anyway.

"We must strike back against the Empire," proposed one of them. "This has to be one of their Wunderwaffen in action, and we can't let that pass."

"I would agree with you," replied Zhenkov, "except for what happened to all of our own men who had used the 'miracle cure' our friends sent us. How are they doing, by the way ?" he asked the chief medical officer of his forces, a man who, before the Revolution, had worked as veterinarian.

"They're not getting worse," he replied with brutal honesty. "The impulse to go West and join whatever it is calling them to Moskva is still present, but it isn't getting any stronger, and they are managing to resist it."

Without mages of their own, the only notice the Federation Army had gotten of the Solstice Event (beyond the same sudden sense of dread that had struck everyone else) had been when every single soldier who had received a Panatseya injection had suddenly started screaming

in agony as their very blood turned against them. They had lost one in ten on the first day, their bodies tearing themselves apart, but the rest had survived, albeit … changed.

They were nothing like the beasts which reportedly were pouring out of Moskva, thankfully. They still had their minds, but their bodies were constantly shifting, bones moving in and out of alignment while their organs did the same and their skin was covered in sudden growths of fur that fell off almost immediately. It was agonizing, but, according to those who could still talk with their jaws shifting and teeth falling and regrowing constantly, the physical pain was nothing compared to the 'Calling', as they put it : a constant drive to go West, to join with the source of the Panatseya that now ruled over the ruins of Moskva – the 'Dark Mother', as they called it in the throes of their pain-wracked fever.

Zhenkov had ordered his men to shoot any of the afflicted who succumbed to the Calling and tried to escape the pens in which they'd been consigned for the time being. Out of the hundreds of afflicted, there had already been several dozens for whom this had been required. The Commander was all too aware that, if no solution to their situation was found, he'd eventually have to order them all executed, and the worst part was that he couldn't be sure it wouldn't be the merciful thing to do.

"That's … well, not good, but probably the best we could reasonably hope for," Zhenkov sighed. "Keep looking after them and inform me the moment something changes. In any case, as I said, the fact that they were affected by the Event indicates that this isn't the Empire's doing, at least not directly. We know, or at least suspect, that the Panatseya was developed using information stolen from the Empire by our spies. Given how careful the Imperials have been in the use of their superweapons, and what happened in Remula when the religious bastards tried to make their own, I think it most likely that someone fucked up and destroyed Moskva as a result."

Nobody said anything in response. It was, of course, treason to even consider that the Federation could err at all, let alone in such a catastrophic way, but the person whose job it'd be to arrest Zhenkov was currently lying on the ground, his brain leaking out from the hole in his skull.

"If vengeance against the Empire isn't our goal," said another officer, "then we still have our duty : the protection of the Federation. The Imperials won't sit back and let Moskva fester : they proved their willingness to get involved in the affairs of sovereign nation when magical disasters are involved with what happened in Ildoa."

"We should go to Josefgrad," suggested someone. "Link up with the rest of the Federation Army, while the railway is still working."

"And leave Manchuria to the Akis ?!"

"The Dominion has withdrawn its own forces back to the territory they securely control," cut in Zhenkov, looking down at the map of Manchuria which covered most of the table in front of him. "Based on the transmissions we were able to intercept," and translate thanks to the help of several officers who spoke Akitsushi, and whom everyone had carefully avoided to ask how they'd learned the language, "something has happened on their island that's got them spooked."

"At the exact same time as the Solstice Event ? That's … convenient."

"Oh, I'm sure the two are related," said Zhenkov. "But we don't have the time to worry about what might be happening over there. We have more than enough problems of our own. To start with, now that Moskva is gone, we can't rely on further supplies being sent to us. So, before we ride to Josefgrad's aid, we need to see if we can avoid starving first."

Over the next two hours, the leaders of the Federation Eastern Army discussed logistics, the state of their stocks, troop morale, and possible courses of action. By the time Zhenkov decided to adjourn and meet again on the next morning, the sun had long since set, and they were all mentally exhausted.

One by one, the officers marched out of the tent, leaving Zhenkov alone (a couple of soldiers had helpfully removed the Commissar's corpse for disposal in the same mass graves where the rest of the Federation dead who could be retrieved were buried). He sighed, deeply, before turning toward his drink cabinet, thinking he could really use a drink right now, before eating what passed for food in the camp – one of the things he'd changed since his arrival was to make the officers eat the same slop as the soldiers, both for morale purposes and to lessen the strain on logistics.

He stopped, frozen mid-turn. There, sat inside the sinfully comfortable leather armchair a squad of his men had dragged out of the ruins of a noble estate a few weeks ago, was an old woman wearing a ragged, patchwork cloak and knitting something with a pair of ivory needles. She hadn't been here during the meeting, or someone would have said something, he was sure of it.

She smiled at him, revealing iron teeth.

"Hello, child," she crooned, in a voice that was like tombstones grinding against one another.

Zhenkov was a man of the Party. He might not, in his heart of hearts, buy completely into the official line, but he still believed in the basic principles of the Federation. Magic, while unquestionably real, was just another force of the universe that the aristocrats wrapped in mysticism and superstition to maintain their hold on it and use it to prop up their rule.

But right now, looking at the old woman sat on his chair in his tent, surrounded by armed men loyal to him and showing no sign of fear or concern, he felt like a small child again, taking refuge near the fire after listening to one too many scary stories. If she was just a mage, then she could kill him easily at this range (there was a reason Jugashvili had been so afraid of magic users), but Zhenkov had a feeling she was much more than that. To start with, she had managed to infiltrate a fully guarded camp, equipped with the second-best mana detection arrays the Federation could steal (the best, of course, being stationed at the border with the Reich, given how much closer to Moskva it was, nevermind which country they were currently at war with).

But really, it was every instinct in his body screaming at him that he was in terrible, terrible danger that convinced him to be as polite as he could be.

"Hello, Grandmother," he replied feebly, the name slipping out of his lips before he could stop himself.

"Quite the mess you lot have made," she tutted. "I don't think anyone has ever managed to offer up so many people in sacrifice all at once. Of course, nowadays there are so many of you running around the place, it's a lot easier than when I was young."

"If … if you say so, Grandmother. What do you want ?"

She smiled again, and it was the most terrifying thing Zhenkov, who had survived military purges and conflict against bloodthirsty Dominion soldiers, had ever seen.

"Why, I want to help you, child. Isn't that what any grandmother does for her grandchildren ?"

---

*July 2nd, 1926 – Western Russy*

Andrei and his family were running. It seemed they had been running forever, though Andrei knew it had only been a few days since the monsters had come to their village.

There were six of them : Andrei, his wife, their three children, and Andrei's old mother. She was in the cart with the two youngest, which was pulled by the family's horse. The old nag was the one animal in the entire farm which hadn't gone crazy long before the monsters had shown up – Andrei had joked the beast was too stubborn to give in to whatever it was affecting the other animals.

It had been the last time he'd laughed. Two days after the animals had started freaking out, the monsters had arrived. Out of a hundred people, Andrei's family were the only ones who had made it out, and he had a disturbing feeling they'd only escaped because the monsters had been full and wanted a proper chase.

Now, that chase was over. The beasts had caught up to them on a muddy path in the middle of nowhere, and were circling around them, growling with hunger. Andrei stood in front of the cart where his family were trembling in fear, a pitchfork in his surprisingly steady hands.

Part of him wanted to pray, but he had turned his back on God after He had turned His back on them all when He'd let the Communists win the civil war and plunge the country into darkness.

Then a figure clad in black fell from the sky, right between him and the monsters.

*"Keinen Schritt weiter,"* it declared, its voice muzzled by the gas mask it wore.

---

Theobald Wüstemann (whose rank of Lieutenant had been revoked by virtue of him dying in action) had been very busy for the last four months. Ever since his resurrection as one of the Untoten and his decision not to walk out into the sun and end his existence, he had spent every night training and studying so as to be the best asset to the Reich he could be.

The training had been harsh, but having witnessed the horrors of the Mythos during the Battle of the Holy See, he knew it was necessary. Yet he hadn't truly grasped what was at stake until he had felt the arrival of the Dark Mother into the world ten days ago. The Untoten hadn't been as badly affected as the Werwölfe, probably because they were already dead, and Being K was an entity based on the corruption of life. To them, the Dark Mother's presence was like a distant pull, an unerring instinct that called to their predatory nature, letting them constantly know in which direction it stood.

That would be useful in the final battle, but that battle was still some time away. Now was the time to save as many people from the Progeny as they could. So many people had died already; they could only rescue so many, even with all the resources of Division Y and the Empire thrown at the problem. But as the Director had said, every life they saved was one blow against the Dark Mother, one body it couldn't twist into another abomination.

Standing between the wolf-headed monstrosities, which had all recoiled at his sudden descent from the sky, Theobald considered the situation. Twelve against one, with a group of civilians behind him to protect, so he couldn't fly. And with the bright summer sun shining down on him, one tear through his reinforced uniform would be debilitating.

He smiled mirthlessly under his mask. Compared to the Director's training regimen, this would be a cakewalk.

---

Zerayah quietly sighed as Theobald punched the head of the last beast off its body. He was young among the Deathless, newly come into his power after spending years in the Imperial Army, where violence was a way of life : it made sense that he'd be enthusiastic, but she wished he'd think about what this looked like to the people they were here to rescue.

She joined him on the ground and approached the family. They looked scared of her, but not too much. Most likely, none of them had ever seen someone with her skin complexion, but they knew that there were people with darker skin in the Southern Continent, and were assuming she was from there. That, or they were just wary of anyone in a military uniform.

She took off her backpack and opened it. It was full of supplies, and she handed a bunch of ration bars to the civilians, including a chocolate bar each to the children. She also gave a compass to the man who looked to be in charge, verifying that he knew how to use it before pointing in the direction of the West. She didn't speak the local tongue, and none of them spoke Imperial either, but such basic communication was well within her capabilities.

The Nazzadi mage wanted to stay with them, to escort them all the way to safety, but she couldn't. There were others who needed help in these vast steppes, and she couldn't let Theobald move on his own. So, once they were back on their way, she took off once more, joining with the Untote as they returned to their assigned path, senses extended as they searched for survivors and Progeny alike.

Zerayah tried not to think of all the people who had already died. She had heard the whispers, read the reports. She knew that millions of people had perished, devoured by the great horror the leaders of the Federation had thoughtlessly called forth, but the numbers just didn't feel

real to her. It was more people than she'd ever seen, more than she could imagine – and they were all dead now.

With her perceptions boosted by her computation orb, she could feel the tainted presence of the Dark Mother in the distance. It was strong, so strong. Its mana signature was at least one order of magnitude stronger than that of the Devourer of Hope which had preyed upon the tribes of Nazza-Duhni.

Zerayah wondered if this was what her people's homeworld had been like, in the days right after the calamity which had brought their civilization down, before the survivors had been culled by monsters, plague and hunger. She wondered too how long it would take before the vast plains stretching beneath her as she flew were as much of a wasteland as her lost home, regardless of the differences between the source of their desolation.

It would be fine, she told herself. The Lady of Stars had a plan, and if there was one thing she had learned since coming to this strange, wondrous and beautiful world, it was that there was nothing in it more dangerous than Tanya Degurechaff with an idea and the time and resources to see it realized.

---

*"Ambassador,*

*We finally got the okay from home. From what I heard, it took a lot of politicking, promises, and outright threats, but the President got Congress' approval. Which is nice, since it'll keep me from being court-martialled, because given what Teslus and every mage in my task force tells me, I would have had to disobey orders and join the fray anyway.*

*Get in touch with the Imperials and tell them America is coming to help. By the time you get this, we will already be moving out through Ildoa.*

*I will be waiting for them to contact me so we can coordinate and arrange our deployment to the border through their rail network. If they give you grief about it, tell them Uncle Sam has his own toys that will be useful in cleaning up the Russy's mess.*

*General Hutton, USA Army*

*PS : By the way, if anyone asks you in a few years, tell them I was joking about going AWOL with an entire army and a bunch of untested superweapons to fight monsters on the territory of another country. Unless I am dead by then, in which case I absolutely meant it."*

Extract from a message received by the USA embassy in Berun, July 4th, 1926.

---

*"My flight made good speed through the Russy airspace. We had four separate skirmishes with Progeny forces, three of them on the ground to assist Russy survivors, but such groups completely disappeared when we approached the former capital.*

*Our fourth engagement was fought against the swarm of flying creatures above Moskva : I made sure to bring back one of the more intact corpses for dissection, but suffice to say,*

*anything less than a concentrated assault with conventional air support cannot hope to breach Moskva's air space and survive. While they were no match for us, the sheer weight of number and their complete disregard for their own casualties would have exhausted us eventually. However, we were able to get a good look at the city before retreating.*

*Moskva is Hell on Earth, and it is getting worse. All man-built structures are slowly sinking into a morass of flesh and vegetation that has spread to cover the entire city. Creatures resembling the instances of Projekt K are wandering through the city, feeding on the eldritch growths. We were able to count seventeen of them, but these are only the ones we were able to observe : there are clearly more.*

*The Dark Mother itself is difficult to describe, as looking at it directly causes powerful headaches, among other, more worrying symptoms. It is huge, at least an order of magnitude larger than the Kinder. It sits at the center of the capital, and we could feel the land's corruption flow out from it.*

*We were unable to confirm the presence or absence of human survivors within Moskva. However, I can say with absolute certainty that if there is anyone human still left alive in there, then death would be a mercy."*

Excerpt from the debriefing of Lieutenant Willibald König following his reconnaissance operation, Eastern Imperial Army headquarters, July 5th, 1926.

---

*"Lycans make up the vast majority of the Progeny. Judging by the fact many of them still wear the remnants of human clothing, it is likely all of them were once human citizens of the Federation before being exposed to Being K's transformative aura.*

*Despite having once been men and women, the Lycans do not show any sign of higher intellect, being instead driven by bestial instincts and an insatiable hunger. Without living specimens to examine (something forbidden by express order of the Director) we can only speculate that the Lycans' metabolism is inherently unstable. They require a constant supply of fresh meat to continue to function.*

*Considering what our late informants within the Federation told us of the developments prior to the Solstice Event, we suspect that the largest number of Lycans present in Moskva are feeding off the very essence of Being K in order to survive now that the city's human population has either been converted or already devoured.*

*While the name 'Lycan', adopted by the soldiers who encountered them, might imply that these creatures are wolf-like in aspect, this is not the case for all of them. Some Lycans show mutations reminiscent of other animals as well : crows, pigs, bats, tigers, spiders, and bears have all been confirmed among the Progeny, along with more categories being reported. Regardless of their nature, however, all Lycans share the same hunger for flesh and complete disregard for human life.*

*In battle, Lycans are effectively immune to small-arms fire, as any bullet that pierce through their tough hide will be expelled by their regeneration factor with nothing to show for it except having angered the creature and drawn its attention. Heavier calibre can dispatch*

*them, but only by inflicting sufficient damage to the heart or brain (and, given their non-conventional biology, the head is the surer bet). M-912 rifles have proven very effective, as they completely neutralize the Lycans' regeneration, as do any injury inflicted by fire, be it generated by an Efreet-type Werwolf or a standard flamethrower.*

*[...]*

*The Satyrs (which are referred to in the Kindermärchen as 'Horned Ones', or 'heralds'), are not creatures native to this world, but Mythos entities which were summoned into it – first, we presume, by the Federation's Mythos research program, and now by the Dark Mother itself. According to our scouts' reports, they appear to be in command of the other Progeny, serving a role not too dissimilar to that of field commander. Every Satyr observed was accompanied by a group of Lycans varying in size from a pack a dozen strong to a horde numbering in the hundreds – although in the latter case, several Satyrs appear to be sharing command of the horde.*

*Outwardly, the Satyrs appear like a cross between an extremely attractive human being, male or female, and an animal. They disdain the use of clothing, and the fact that they do not even wear the scraps seen on the Lycans was what led us to realize they weren't transformed humans but Mythos creatures in truth.*

*They exude pheromones capable of driving even the chastest of individuals mad with lust. Fortunately, the Untoten are immune to these pheromones due to their own peculiar biology, and mages can protect themselves by using a standard oxygen generation spell. Werwölfe, on the other hand, are vulnerable to these pheromones : if not for the fact that patrols in Russy territory are made up of as wide a selection of Division Y units as possible, several Werwölfe would have been lost to the Satyrs. Based upon the aftermath of their passage in Russy settlements, it appears that the Satyrs devour their non-Progeny partners after copulation, be they male or female.*

*Despite the delicate appearance of most Satyrs, they are possessed of incredible strength, comparable to that of a Werwolf. They are also incredibly quick, and even more resilient to damage than the Lycans, while equally capable of regenerating from all but the heaviest injuries. Based on previous engagements, it takes two or more Werwölfe working in unison (and having overcome the influence of the pheromones) to defeat a single Satyr, but a single mage or Untote can kill them if they stay at range in the case of the mage and burn through enough mage blood for the Untote.*

*[...]*

*The swarms of flying creatures which cover the skies of Moskva are similar to locusts, but several times larger, and possessed of a powerful bite that can pierce through even the thickest uniform. While individually they are nothing more than a nuisance, the swarms of Moskva number in the millions, and they are capable of overloading a mage's shield by throwing themselves against it until the sheer volume of impacts overwhelms the shield.*

*Upon examination of the specimens brought back by Lieutenant König, we have discovered that the Locusts (name pending official approbation) lack anything resembling a digestive system. As such, they are utterly incapable of feeding themselves, something which blatantly*

*flies against life and evolution as we understand them. Our best guess as to their source, based on the scouting report, is that they are bred in large numbers within hives on the ground, and released into the air upon maturation. Given the size of each organism, we estimate that a single individual Locust cannot survive more than a single day before succumbing to starvation. Perhaps they are then 'recycled' by the biological contamination spreading across Moskva, or perhaps the nature of Being K makes this unnecessary.*

*[...]*

*The largest and most dangerous creatures of the Progeny are the Kinder, identical to those summoned by Projekt K. They have been observed around the ruins of Moskva, and are likely to be responsible for the fact that the city is in ruin. For more information on the eldritch biology and capabilities of the Kinder and suggestions as to how to take them down, please refer to report K-18, redacted upon the completion of Projekt K by Division Y.*

*To summarize the contents of that file, the Kinder are incredibly dangerous and difficult to take down. Their mass, combined with their regeneration, means that even concentrated artillery fire cannot take them down. Like all Progeny, they emanate an aura of supernatural terror capable of sending even the most hardened soldier to flight. They can crush tanks underneath their hooves, and their tentacles can wipe out entire squads in seconds, either by crushing them, tearing them to pieces, or dropping them into the Kinder's many mouths.*

*[...]*

*While this concludes our report on the observed creatures of the Progeny, it must be said that there have been numerous unconfirmed reports of other bio-forms being deployed against the Imperial Army. Some of these are undoubtedly mistakes, but given the prodigious fertility associated with Being K, the existence of entirely unknown bio-forms can be taken as fact."*

Extract from the compiled scouting and autopsy reports of Progeny corpses performed by members of Division Y, July 6th, 1926.

---

*July 10th, 1926 – Eastern Army Forward Operation Base*

Curse those incompetent, careless, mass-murdering Commie bastards. I knew them getting their hands on the Kindermärchen wouldn't end well, but even I hadn't thought things would get this bad this fast. I had planned for the worst, though, and now we were all going to see whether these preparations had been enough to prevent the end of the world.

In order to better secure the borders of the Reich, the Eastern Army had moved out from its network of bases and fortresses and into the territory of the Federation. With the Federation Army forces normally stationed there to prevent precisely that gone to Moskva, there was no opposition – if anything, the locals were positively relieved to see us roll in. That had surprised me at first, until Visha, who had volunteered to work as a translator to assist with the refugees, had revealed to me that the vast majority of Russy civilians didn't really believe in Communism, despite their leaders' best efforts to indoctrinate them.

As more and more Russy civilians fled from the Progeny, Imperial Ostland, the region of the Reich next to the Federation (and whose ownership had been contested over the centuries, though that particular question had most definitely been tabled for the time being) was being slowly but surely turned into a massive war and refugee camp. So far, Imperial supplies were handling the strain, and I derived some bitter amusement at the thought that K-Brot might actually be an improvement to the diet of many of the people seeking safety behind Imperial lines.

Since the Revolution which had overthrown the previous tsarist regime and led to the exile of Visha's family (along with many other dispossessed nobles who had managed to escape the death squads), the Empire's relationship with Russy had been cold, but cordial. Neither side had been interested in fighting a war against the other : the newborn Federation had its own problems at home, to say nothing of their ongoing conflict with the Akitsushima Dominion in the East; while the Reich was understandably wary of invading a country as large and desolate as Russy.

Given how I remembered such campaigns had gone back in my previous world, I couldn't disagree that making peace had been the best choice, even though it had left millions of people at the 'mercy' of the Communist revolutionaries. The one silver lining about this whole disaster, thin and ragged as it may be, was that I was fairly certain that it had destroyed any chance of the Communist ideology to take root and grow to the level of influence it had reached in my old world.

Our current base of operation was located inside the settlement of Tiegenhoff. Hundreds of Imperial engineers were working around the clock to turn it into a fortress and depot suited to our needs, with new convoys full of supplies and personnel arriving hourly.

At present, there were multiple teams operating within the Federation. Officially, they were all deployed for the purpose of scouting the advance of the Progeny, gain as much intelligence on the terrain and foe as they could, and inflict damage on small enemy groups when possible.

Unofficially, they were also charged with helping as many people to escape as possible. Part of it was simple pragmatism : every Russy who escaped the Progeny was one less body for them to eat or the Dark Mother to transform. But really, it was more about morale and image. Until the Solstice Event, we had managed to avoid any massive civilian casualties related to Mythos warfare – in fact, the Great War had been remarkably 'clean' in that regard, though it'd be little consolation to the Imperial and Francois soldiers who had died in the mud of the Rhine, or the Dacians who'd been crushed by our own Kinder.

That had all changed now. I still struggled to wrap my head around the fact that over two million people were dead, and that regardless of what I or anyone else did, more would die before this was over. After an atrocity like this, I needed the world to not think of all Mythos-touched beings as bloodthirsty monsters. Things were already tense after what had happened in Bovariastadt and Remula : if all of us ended up painted with the same brush, I could kiss my hopes of a peaceful retirement goodbye.

Also, I didn't fancy telling the likes of Uger or Weiss that they couldn't go out and rescue civilians from monsters. The two of them had led numerous sorties beyond our lines, flying

ahead of our forces to help defend small villages attacked by marauding Progeny packs and assisting in their evacuation to the relative safety we provided. For some reason, the Progeny were unwilling to approach my position – they could feel me in the same way Division Y's enhanced soldiers could, but unlike them, this didn't result in respect but fear. Which meant that I had the perfect excuse to sit back and deal with the paperwork instead of leaving the base to sortie in person.

Of course, that didn't mean I was defenceless if the Progeny decided to attack anyway. I was keeping my computation orb-topped cane close at hand hand, while the silver flute whose music had doomed the Dacian Army was attached to my belt. I had no idea whether it would have any effect on the Progeny, but thought it better to have it and not need it than the other way around.

I was also carrying an injector of Kosmosblut around my neck. Even after asking the Denkmaschine, I still had no idea what the effects of another dose of the stuff would be : the thinking engine's replies to my repeated queries on the subject had been even more vague than usual. I knew that dealing with the Dark Mother would require me using it, but I was perfectly happy not thinking about it for as long as I could.

That the Dark Mother was staying in Moskva was a double-edged blessing. On the one hand, if the avatar had been moving, the area of its influence would have moved ahead of it, driving animals crazy and corrupting all forms of life, while also putting us all under a strict time limit, since there was no way High Command would allow it to reach the Fatherland proper.

On the other hand, as I had said to the Generals, the Dark Mother's position was growing stronger and more difficult to attack with every passing day. König's report had made it clear that the entity was in the process of converting Moskva into a little slice of its nightmarish home reality.

Unfortunately, for Operation Gottesmörder to have any chance of success, we needed to gather all the firepower we could possibly get. We hadn't quite emptied Castle Schwartzstein for this deployment (there were still items in the Black Vaults which would only make things worse if they were used against Being K and its Progeny) but it was a close thing.

Four Hünen were already at the FOB, with the others en route to join them. Given the warmachines' temper, it was better not to move them all at once if it could be avoided. We were also emptying the armories of M-912 rifles to the bare minimum required to maintain security in Castle Schwartzstein, and Projekt M itself was being very, very carefully brought here as well.

Zettour had taken my suggestion of an all-mage task force suitable for rapid deployment to heart, and promptly dumped a whole bunch of candidates on my lap with orders to get them trained in the usage of the D-24 dual-core computation orb. It had taken a lot of work – transitioning from single-core to dual-core orbs required a complete change of ingrained habits – but I'd found nothing motivated people to learn like being hunted in the night sky by hungry Untoten. The skies of Tiegenhoff were constantly patrolled by mages of Division Y and the Eastern Army, and Zettour had promised to send as many as he could from the rest of the Reich as well.

In addition, we had managed to run through two more rounds of the Rite of Union, maintaining our fifty-fifty odds of survival. No new Werwolf sub-type had been discovered, but the added strength of fifty-three Phantoms, sixty-one Mirages, three Echoes, three Shadows, two Spectres, eleven Whispers, two Vampires, two Nightmares, one Widow and One Efreet was still more than welcome.

After the Solstice Event, I had put my foot down on attempting the Rite of Union again during the full moon of June. While I felt bad for the crippled soldiers who had been waiting their turn with trepidation (a fifty-fifty shot at survival being odds they were more than willing to risk if it meant a chance at returning to full health), trying to call forth entities from beyond the veil two days after the Russy had summoned what looked like the avatar of Shub-Niggurath was far, far too risky. Until it was destroyed and the situation in Russy dealt with, I wanted all of Division Y's occultists to be focused on the issue at hand.

Besides, I didn't want to throw Werwölfe fresh out of the ritual circle into what promised to be the harshest campaign of Division Y yet. Their natural weapons might be very effective against the Lycans, but the sad truth was, our supersoldiers were going to be ludicrously outnumbered in a straight fight. Victory would rely heavily on the conventional Army to make things even through the liberal application of massed artillery.

"Message for you, Major," said one of the many aides running around the town. Usually, it'd be Visha's job to receive it and check it was worth my time, but with the sun bright up my Adjutant was sleeping in a nice sun-proofed room.

I thanked the messenger, ignoring the awe in his gaze at being in the presence of one of Division Y's near-mythical officers, took the letter and read it. My eyes widened, and for the first time in days, I found myself smiling.

"Well, well, well," I said out loud. "How interesting."

Finally, some unexpected news which were good, for a change.

---

From : Brigadier General Hans von Zettour

To : Major Tanya Degurechaff

Subject : Eastern Operations Reinforcements

Date : July 10th, 1926

*Major Degurechaff,*

*We have received unexpected news from our visitors from across the ocean. Having learned about the situation in Russy, they have volunteered their assistance in dealing with what they called 'a clear and present threat to all Mankind'.*

*While they have shared little details, they claim to have brought their own superweapons with them to Ildoa, and are willing to deploy them alongside our own against the Progeny.*

*Considering the gravity of the threat to Europa posed by the Russy situation, as well as the potential diplomatic benefits, we have tentatively agreed to an alliance.*

*You can expect our new friends to arrive to the Eastern border within the week.*

Chapter End Notes

AN : This chapter was supposed to be a quick interlude showing the various players getting into position. Instead, it's the longest bloody chapter of the entire story - so far.

Needless to say, the Muse was very enthusiastic with this one.

Zhenkov is, of course, Not!Zhukov. The timeline of YS is quite messy compared to real History (even without taking magic into account), but someone mentioned him on the SB thread and I couldn't stop myself. Please don't get angry at me for not being historically accurate with things like ranks, names, and a thousand other historical details, since like I said, the YS timeline is a mess and we don't know a lot about the Not!Russia/Not!Japan conflict in canon (plus, you know, magic). Same with his rank : I did some research, then decided that "Commander" was good enough. No doubt he has a complicated official rank, but that's what his men call him for simplicity's sake.

He also wasn't even supposed to be in this story until someone mentioned him on the SB thread, at which point I thought "Hey, that could be interesting". So I started writing a quick scene showing him all the way on the other side of Russy, thinking he would (wisely) stay back there and not get involved in the mess.

Then Not!Baba Yaga showed up on his chair without asking me, and I was well and truly frakked. Not as much as Zhenkov himself is now, sure, but still.

I have ... ideas, regarding the Grandmother's role in the story, along with whatever it is that's happening in the Akitsushiman Dominion that's making them pull out some of their forces from Manchuria. They will be explored later : right now, the story's focus is on Moskva and Operation Gottesmörder. Still, never let it be said that I'm not willing to adapt my writing to take into account a suggestion from my readers if it sounds interesting.

As always, I look forward to your thoughts on this chapter, and somewhat trepidatiously to your suggestions as well. I think it's fair to say that I'm back in the groove with writing this fic : hopefully my updated plans for this arc won't be randomly thrown into the bin again.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"SHOW YOUR SUPPORT OF OUR RUSSY BRETHREN !*

*Starting from tomorrow and until the need for it stops, the Path of Stars will be holding a collect for the benefit of the refugees fleeing the troubles in the Federation. Tens of thousands of people have already crossed the border, and many more live in the region which has been secured by our brave soldiers – but even the latter need help, as they have spent the last years under the rule of the same tyrants whose incompetence and greed caused the Solstice Event.*

*Non-perishable foodstuffs, clothes, medicines and hygiene products are welcome. If you aren't sure whether something is suitable for donation, bring it along and our volunteers will help you. If you're interested in giving your time to help, then you are also welcome !*

*This collection was approved by the Ministry of War, which will supervise the transfer of all contributions to the refugees.*

*Remember, we have more things in common than we have differences."*

Tract found on a wall in Berun, July 1st, 1926.

---

*"This morning, Commander Zhenkov introduced me and the other officers to a strange old woman he called simply 'Grandmother'. He didn't tell us where she came from, and truth be told, none of us felt like asking. There is something about her that just commands respect and obedience.*

*At her request, we brought out one of the Panatseya afflicted and chained him to a metal bed. He let us chain him, but he was still struggling against his chains, his body twitching with agony. The Grandmother approached him and spoke a single word, and he suddenly relaxed and stopped moving.*

*She then took one of our scalpels, and started carving strange sigils into his torso. He didn't cry out, but then the pain of the cut must be nothing compared to his body breaking itself before knitting itself back together, again and again.*

*It took her ten minutes before she was done. By that time, the cuts had healed, but unlike normal injuries suffered by the afflicted, they left scars behind, red and vivid. More importantly, the patient's affliction receded, and within moments he was back to normal, his body no longer wracked by ceaseless mutation.*

*Not only was he healed, he also claimed to no longer feel the Calling to Moskva. The Grandmother told us that, thanks to the sigils, the power of the Dark Mother was now*

*contained and could be used safely. We ran the patient through some fitness tests, and he displayed incredible strength, speed and reflexes, and a small cut to his hand healed within seconds. The Grandmother named him the first Okhotnik, the Hunters who will purge the beasts which plague Russy.*

*I have tried to draw the sigils in my notebook, but the paper caught fire before I could finish the first. Not that it's much of an issue : every single one of them is burned into my mind, and I feel I could reproduce them with my eyes closed. Which is what I and the other surgeons spent the rest of the day doing, tracing the sigils on the flesh of every afflicted. Of course, none of us are mages, but the Grandmother walked among us and calmed down each one before we got to work.*

*At the rate we're going, I estimate we'll have finished treating all the afflicted in a couple of days at the latest, leaving Commander Zhenkov with several hundreds Okhotniki. Based on the schedule he has set for our departure, we should be just in time.*

*At the Grandmother's suggestion, we have started requisitioning farming equipment and refitting it for use by the Okhotniki in melee. The weapons our engineers have made so far aren't elegant, but the Okhotniki can wield them with ease despite their weight. The Grandmother also carved smaller sigils into the metal with her needles, and said that these would help kill beasts.*

*No one disputed the point, ludicrous though the whole thing might have sounded. It is strange, how quickly we have all accepted her presence and authority. None of us dare to say so out loud, but I know we are all thinking of the same old stories, passed down from one generation to the next for centuries before the Revolution branded all such tales as superstitious nonsense.*

*When I asked her why she had come to us now, she said that the beast's roar (I assume she was talking about the Solstice Event) woke her from her nap, and when she got out to find out what had happened, she saw the mess we'd made and came to help. Emboldened, I asked her if she knew what was happening in the Dominion that caused their forces to withdraw across the frontline. She muttered something about 'that fool fox girl being up to her old tricks again'. I dared not press her for more details, as she didn't look pleased.*

*It is a strange alliance we have made, if alliance even is the right word. But needs must when the devil drives."*

From the personal writings of Doctor Dmitri, Chief Surgeon of the Federation Army Manchurian Corps, July 2nd, 1926.

---

*"THE END IS NIGH"*

*"THE BROOD RISES"*

*"THE PRIESTS LIED TO US"*

*"THE FEAST HAS BEGUN"*

*"THE OLD ONES ARE AWOKEN"*

*"ALL IS LOST"*

*"GOD HAS FORSAKEN US"*

*"BETTER TO SERVE IN THE HELL THAT IS COME THAN BE DEVOURED BY ITS DEMONS"*

*"SHE CALLS AND HER CHILDREN ANSWER"*

*"THE MONSTROUS SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH"*

Graffitis found on the walls of buildings in Francois, Albion, Ispagna, Akitsushima, and more, in the days following the Solstice Event. Police investigations later linked these slogans to a spike of suicides and violent, deranged murders, which involved mutilation and, in some cases, cannibalism. Upon medical examination, those culprits which were captured alive were shown to all possess low-level mana potential, and were declared insane in countries where it was applicable.

---

*"Since what has now been named the Solstice Event, the Empire of Brazil's general mood has remained uneasy. While we are separated from Moskva, the source of the great disturbance according to both foreign sources and our own mages and mana detection arrays, by thousands and thousands of kilometers, there is no denying the grim mood which has descended upon the Empire.*

*As news from Russy trickle to the rest of the world, the picture they paint of the situation there becomes darker and darker. The death of the vast majority of Moskva's millions of inhabitants has been confirmed, and while the casualties suffered within the larger region might never be known for certain (given the utter confusion reigning in the region, and the loss of many official records with the capital's destruction), there is no doubt they are horrifyingly high.*

*Reporters on the ground have been allowed to join the military forces sent into the Federation territory to look for survivors and prepare the ground for an offensive at the capital. A compilation of several such articles, translated from Albish and Francois for the convenience of our readers, can be found on page 4, although we recommend you brace yourself before reading, as their content is quite harrowing.*

*[...]*

*Not helping things locally are the strange events which have started occurring across our country since the Solstice Event. While this paper has already reported on the hysteria which has seized certain individuals and turned them into doomsayers (with no less than thirteen such individuals recorded within our capital São Sebastião de Janiero alone, nine of whom turned violent when law enforcement intervened), it saddens us to inform our readers that more sinister happenings have also occurred.*

*Yesterday, the village of Cruzeiro do Tocantos, located on the edge of the Penthesilea Forest, was found completely empty of life by the merchants coming to purchase harvested wood. None of the settlement's two hundred inhabitants were to be seen, and according to the preliminary police reports, there are signs of violence – broken windows, battered doors, and the likes.*

*His Imperial Majesty Pedro III gave a speech yesterday from the Palace of São Sebastião in which he called for national unity and solidarity, and promised that all possible efforts are being made to ensure the safety of the people ..."*

Extract from the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Sebastião*, July 6th, 1926.

---

*"While the Solstice Event has sent shock waves both metaphorical and magical through the world, the hidden world of spycraft has been affected especially badly.*

*Since the Communist Revolution overthrew the Tsar and Jugashvili successfully defeated his rivals for the Federation's throne (though of course they didn't call it such, even though the General Secretary held more power than any sovereign this side of absolute monarchy), the Federation has ever attempted to spread its revolution to other countries. Using the writings of the philosophers they claimed as inspiration for their new regime, the Federation's masters reached out beyond their borders, making contact with sympathisers and sending spies to sow the seeds of revolution.*

*While there hadn't been any notable communist uprising linked to these activities, it was the opinion of secret services throughout the world that such was only a matter of time. Qin in particular was considered by most analysts to be the most likely to follow in the Federation's footsteps, but agents of all the Great Powers were concerned and active to prevent the spread of this ideology within their own borders. The Empire was no exception, as we know for certain that the Russy spies managed to infiltrate us deeply enough that they were able to locate the headquarters of Division Y.*

*However, with Moskva lost to the Solstice Event, the shadow networks assembled by the Federation's spymasters now find themselves completely bereft of guidance or support. While nations have risen and fallen since men first started building them, this is still an unprecedented scenario, and one even our most imaginative analysts failed to account for in writing the Reich's contingency plans. Thus, we have attempted to evaluate the possible international fallout.*

*Although we have yet to confirm it, there are rumors that one Russy operative in Magna Rumeli had a mental breakdown upon learning the news, irrevocably breaking his cover in full view of half a dozen police officers by loudly cursing in the Russy language. Outside of such extremes, however, the most common reaction, at least among professional spies, has been to search for more information as to what has befallen Moskva, to see if any of their superiors – or anyone else knowing about their existence – might have managed to escape the devastation.*

*We expect some spies will simply disappear, or make use of their cover identities to continue living comfortably. However, the Federation has proven itself capable of producing*

*surprisingly fanatical agents, and these might decide instead to turn to terrorism, and seek to avenge their fallen masters. To such unbalanced individuals, striking at the Reich in general and Division Y in particular would be very appealing, as they are likely to blame us for their superiors' own stupidity.*

*Given the current situation and the needs of Operation Gottesmörder, we will focus our efforts in preventing such interference in the mechanisms of the Reich."*

Excerpt from a report by Imperial Intelligence Services, July 10th, 1926.

---

*July 12th, 1926 – Western Russy*

Günther walked through the ruins of the village, scanning for any remaining threat. Around the Puppe, the rest of the task force was doing the same. They had just finished killing the last of the Lycans that had attacked them when they had entered the settlement, and now they were checking for survivors, be they beasts or humans.

In the distance, Günther could feel the presence of the Dark Mother, and it filled it with a feeling it now recognized as dread. It was so large, and Günther was so small. The godling could crush Günther without even realizing.

But Kin Evelyn had been right. If they didn't do anything, the godling would crush them eventually, simply by spreading its influence until it covered the entire planet and there was nowhere left to hide. So they needed to help their friends and join the fight, even if they were scared.

Günther saw something in the wreckage of a building which had once been a house. It bent over and picked it up before straightening its Orichalcum shell upright. In its hand was a small spinning top, which it recognized from having seen some of the children in Castle Schwartzstein play with similar toys. It was of simple make, wrought from wood and with a bit of string still attached to it, but with a care that spoke of the love its maker had felt for the child who had played with it. It was also stained with blood, dried red covering half its surface.

Günther looked at the ground where it had found the toy, but there was no corpse from which the blood might have come. It tried to think of how this could be, to imagine the series of events which could explain the bloodstained spinning top in its hands. Its kind were not made for such things : it remembered nothing of the time before its awakening in Gehrman's workshop, its first memory that of the old man's smile as it tried to move within an unfamiliar body, but it knew that much. Yet still, it tried, slowly piecing together pieces of information until a coherent picture emerged.

It thought of the Progeny, the spawn of the Dark Mother which roamed this land and which it and the others were here to hunt. It thought of the people who had lived here, and did so no more. It thought of the child who must have held this toy before it, and of what must have happened to them for them to be gone, their blood on this small sculpted piece of wood, their body nowhere to be found.

Slowly, with the agony of revelation burning through a mind that was both so young and so ancient, Günther understood, and his orichalcum hands trembled with grief and rage as, on his face, the mouth Gehrman had crafted with such painstaking care in the image of his lost squad mate opened at last.

"I promise you," he said softly to the ghosts of the village's dead, forcing his words, the first words any Puppen other than his sister Evelyn had ever spoken, past the sudden obstruction in his throat, silver tears running from his eyes.

"We will stop this."

---

*July 13th, 1926 – Western Russy*

"What in God's name am I doing here ?"

Andrew knew the answer to his own muttered question, of course, but it still felt good to complain about it, even if only to himself. He was here because he had accepted the job when the proposal had come, on the basis that, out of everyone in the little underground press he and his friends were running, he was the only one with actual experience as a war reporter. And thus (hopefully), also the one with the best chance of making it back alive from what was shaping up to be the most dangerous region of the entire world.

Their ever-elusive sponsors had paid a pretty penny to ensure his presence here, on the newest (and, God willing, final) front of the Great War. He still wasn't sure how they had managed it, to be honest : as a citizen of the Allied Kingdom, Andrew wasn't exactly welcome in Imperial territory at the moment. Sure, technically he hadn't set foot in the Reich itself, but the old borders didn't mean much now that Moskva had gotten eaten by some unholy monstrosity.

But that was his mistake. The Reich wanted the whole world to see what was happening here. They wanted everyone to see what Elder Magic could do, to show what they could have done if they had so desired.

The reconnaissance group he had attached himself to had passed through over a dozen eerily empty villages now, with days-old bloodstains and broken doors and barricades a silent testament to what had happened. They hadn't found any mass graves, but that was only because the Progeny didn't leave anything of their victims behind to bury. The only corpses he'd seen were those of the monsters responsible, or 'Progeny' as the Imperials called them.

He still took plenty of pictures, of course. This needed to be recorded; the world needed to know what was happening in Russy. Once they returned to Tiegenhoff, he would send the negatives back home, along with detailed transcriptions of what he'd seen, so that his colleagues back home could edit it all into an article fit for print.

The images of the corpses would need to be put under a warning to avoid children seeing them, but the sight of the beasts should be enough to convince everyone that the Imperials weren't making things up to justify invading the Federation. Apparently, there were still some

fringe elements making such claims, despite the mana readings still coming out of Moskva which could be detected anywhere on the bloody planet.

Given Andrew seemed to be the only Albish reporter in the area (there were Imperial ones attached to other reconnaissance teams, and he was pretty sure he recognized a couple of Francois ones as well, but no one else), this might even be his ticket back into the good graces of the 'proper' newspapers, Andrew thought ruefully.

Not that he was in a hurry to return there, not after quitting his previous job in protest over government censorship. Although, now that he thought about it, it sure had seemed like Churbull had changed his mind, based on the gossip he'd heard before leaving Albion …

---

*July 15th, 1926 – Tiegenhoff, Eastern Army Forward Operation Base*

Colonel Eric von Lergen stepped off the plane that had brought him to Tiegenhoff's brand-new airfield, constructed in record time thanks to the use of mage labor. There were ongoing efforts to connect the city to the Imperial railway network, but even with all the might of the Reich seemingly dedicated to Operation Gottesmörder, such things took time.

With his job overseeing logistics in Berun complete – or, well, complete enough that he could hand it over to other hands – Zettour had sent him to the new Eastern Front without hesitation. He was, after all, the Empire's foremost expert in leading combined Mythos and conventional forces against the various enemies of Humanity.

One day, Lergen would find a way to make the old Brigadier General pay for that. But for now, he had more important concerns.

The trip hadn't exactly been pleasant, but there was no time to rest, or get anything into his stomach beside a cup of awful coffee – God, he missed the Ildoan stuff. Within a couple of hours from his landing, he was standing in front of the Imperial headquarters, shaking hands with a man wearing the uniform of a Unified States General.

"Welcome to Tiegenhoff, General Hutton," said Lergen in Albish. "We are glad to have you join us here."

By express order of High Command, Degurechaff wasn't going to be the one welcoming their American allies to Tiegenhoff. They wanted the Americans to take them seriously, and while nobody who talked with the Major for more than a couple minutes could possibly take her for an ordinary girl, it was Lergen's face which had been plastered on the Ildoan newspapers.

"And we're happy to be here too," replied the American with a wide grin. "My boys were getting antsy sitting on their arses in Ildoa instead of getting to play with their new toys."

"I assure you, they will have plenty of opportunities to test them out," said Lergen. "Follow me, please. We have prepared an overview of the strategic situation."

It wasn't the first time the two of them had met, of course. That had happened in Ildoa, when Lergen had gratefully handed over the duty of overseeing the Kingdom to the neutral

Americans while he returned to the Fatherland, where all he had to worry about were overdue paperwork and wondering what Division Y would get up to next, not crazy Albish mages who thought he was the reincarnation of some ancient evil.

General Hutton had struck him as very enthusiastic about being dispatched to Europa, or at least working hard to give off that impression. Given what the American newspapers had reported about the Wunderwaffen, Lergen couldn't imagine there had been a lot of competition to decide which General would have the dubious honor of leading the American contingent.

He hadn't had the opportunity to evaluate the General's warcraft skills, but he was hopeful. Besides, even if Hutton was a complete moron, he had still brought a lot of firepower with him, and that alone counted for something. The American convoy was made up of over a hundred trucks, reportedly carrying the superweapons which had been built across the ocean since the Wunderwaffe race had begun along with several hundred USA troopers as escort (the bulk of the American infantry having stayed in Ildoa, both to carry on their initial mission and to make the journey here quicker) and a whole bunch of technicians and scientists.

As Lergen and Hutton walked toward the command center, they began to unload the cargo, assisted by Imperial workers. Even with the Imperial Army's typical efficiency, it would take a few hours to get everything squared away, which should be enough time for Lergen to go over the strategic overview with Hutton and discuss how their respective superweapon researchers should interact.

It wasn't as if they could avoid it, state secrets or not. They needed to have a good idea of what the American superweapons were capable of in order to plan Operation Gottesmörder properly, and there was no one better suited to understanding that kind of stuff than the Director of Division Y, who could then translate it into standard Imperial for Lergen (and come up with an actual battle plan he would then have to pass as his own invention for the rest of the world, *again*). The idea of letting Degurechaff meet whoever was in charge of the American version of Division Y was slightly terrifying, but far less so than the thought of having to introduce her to General Hutton.

… come to think of it, did the Imperial Military Academy teach Albish ? He knew Degurechaff spoke the language with a level of fluency that would surprise anyone who didn't know her, but he wasn't sure when she'd learned it. Of course, this was certainly the least of all the disturbing things about Division Y's Director.

---

*July 15th, 1926 – Tiegenhoff – USA Expedition Camp*

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I couldn't help the childish glee that rose in me at the sight of the giant robot towering over the section of Tiegenhoff which had been given to the Americans. Maybe it was the Japanese boy in me, but there was just something awesome about the sight of who knew how many tons of metal being shaped in the form of a giant humanoid, knowing that, in defiance of all the engineering reasons which made the shape supremely impractical, it would still move with deadly intent.

Yes, the Hünen technically qualified too, but I had seen what was inside their metal shells : they were more akin to eldritch cyborgs than giant robots. Besides, at twenty meters, the American mech was around two meters taller than Division Y's own giant warmachines, though I didn't know enough about its capabilities yet to know whether it was more dangerous or not. It wasn't ready for battle yet : several technicians and engineers were working hard over it, getting the last pieces out of the trucks in which its disassembled bulk had been stored for transport and putting them into place.

While Colonel Lergen had welcomed them officially and started talking strategy with their General, it was up to me to liaise with the eggheads of this 'Research Group 51', whose creations the Americans were confident could match up to the Progeny.

With the sun having set down over Tiegenhoff, I was striding into the camp, Visha was at my side. Like me, she wore tinted glasses to conceal the transformation of her eyes, a result of drinking my blood during the liberation of Bovariastadt. They suited her, I thought, although I couldn't help but cringe slightly at the realization we were both, effectively, wearing sunglasses at night. At least that hadn't yet become a cliché in the popular consciousness, and we both had good reasons for them.

Since she'd drunk my blood along with taking her second dose of Endlose Nacht, Visha's eyes had become completely, uniformly black. The contrast with her pale skin was quite striking, and her vision, already enhanced by her transformation into an Untote, had become even better. But there was no way to pass the change off as anything natural. Sure, as a member of Division Y with the organization's emblem proudly displayed on her uniform, nobody would dare give her grief for it, but I still felt it best to conceal the growing inhumanity of our soldiers from the common trooper. And, obviously, that went double for our new American friends – or 'friends', as the case may be.

I didn't think the Americans were going to turn on us while the threat of the Progeny was on the horizon, but I wasn't foolish enough not to realize that the reason their superweapons were here in the first place was to keep us in check. Which, of course, made perfect sense from the perspective of the Unified States, and since they'd helped us out by taking care of Ildoa everyone had come out of our diplomatic exchanges happy thus far – well, except for the Albish, but who cared about them ? That crazed wizard of theirs had nearly completely ruined their international reputation with his antics.

In any case, while the Americans were our allies against our common foe, they were clearly going to use this opportunity to get as much information about Division Y as they could, and it behoved us to do the same to them. Given what I knew of the Unified States' war potential once the country got started, though, I really, really didn't want them to declare war on the Empire.

Which meant that it was in everyone's best interests for this first meeting between the heads of our nations' respective research programs to go as smoothly as possible. I put on my best smile as a gentleman in a labcoat walked briskly toward us. It was a look I was used too, of course, but there was something about his face that seemed vaguely familiar.

"Hello !" he greeted us. "I am Nicol Teslus, chief researcher of Research Group 51."

"Nice to meet you, Professor Teslus," I replied, shaking his proffered hand. "I am Major Tanya Degurechaff, Director of Division Y."

If he was surprised by my youthful appearance, the mask which covered half my face, or the long-sleeved uniform I wore despite the relative warmth of the summer night, he showed no sign of it. I had only known him for five seconds, and I could already tell he was of that breed of scientists who are entirely dedicated to their research, with little time for social niceties. I had worked with plenty of those in my time as Director of Division Y, and so long as he didn't cut corners on safety, I didn't anticipate any problem with working with him too.

Teslus. The name sounded familiar, for some reason … Ah. So this was the local equivalent of Nikola Tesla, then, the famous inventor who, in my old world, had ended up running afoul of Thomas Edison's savvier business practices. It seemed he'd been more successful here, given that we were surrounded by the fruits of his genius.

Then, all of a sudden, I remembered an old bit of pop culture, which claimed that Nikola Tesla had been the inspiration for Lovecraft's Nyarlathotep. For one moment, I wondered if I had just shaken hands with the earthly avatar of the 'Being N' whose existence we'd theorized after debriefing the Albish mages involved in the raid on Remula. But surely not. If that were the case, I would've felt something, or any of the supersoldiers resting at the base before going back out to hunt Progeny warbands would've.

Nevertheless, I resolved to be careful around this man. Even without my crazy theory, Teslus was still clearly someone important to the American effort to match Division Y.

"You're here to get a look at our devices, yes ?" he asked.

"Exactly," I nodded. "Of course, I'll give you one of our own in exchange."

"Good ! I look forward to it." He smiled, with all appearances of sincerity. "Plenty of rumors about your Wunderwaffen have reached the States, but hard facts are few and far between."

Though I was most interested in the giant mech – which, according to Teslus, was somewhat unoriginally called the Titan – we started our inspection with the smaller suits of power armor that were lined up inside a building which had served as a stable for the village's farm animals, before they had all needed to be put down as Being K's influence drove them crazy.

The Americans had brought twenty of these suits : not nearly enough to face off against the horde of Progeny dwelling in and around Moskva, but enough to make a formidable tip of the spear. Teslus listed off the durability tests they had done on the suits, but when he started explaining the resilience of their magic shields, I asked :

"I'm curious about how you solved the power supply issue, not just for these shields, but for the whole thing. Even an elite mage would struggle to keep these suits running for long, and you said you are using people without enough mana capacity to qualify as aerial mages as pilots. Did you figure out mana stabilization to build up a stockpile before deployment ?"

That had been one of the goals of Elenium Arms with their research into multi-core computation orbs, before that poor bastard Schugel had been mind-controlled by Being X and

blown the whole thing to pieces. Their notes, which we'd used to create the D-24 dual-core computation orb, suggested that they had been on their way to success, but a triple or quadruple core was required to successfully run the stabilization formulas, and I'd thought that feat of engineering beyond anyone – except for Schugel under the influence of Being X, but the Trinity's Tear had been a cursed relic, not a real design.

If the Americans had cracked it in so little time – since from what Teslus had let slip so far, I was pretty sure Research Group 51 hadn't existed before we had started throwing our Wunderwaffen at the enemies of the Empire – then they were truly a force to be reckoned with.

"Oh, no," Teslus waved off. "Nothing like that. Though I do believe you'll find this even more impressive. This is the T-Engine, and once kickstarted with an initial jolt of mana, it draws power directly from the universe's submanifold dimensions …"

From there, he trailed off into incomprehensible technobabble, but a few keywords jumped out at me. When I managed to piece together what that meant, I couldn't stop myself from exclaiming out loud :

"You figured out a way to extract Zero-point energy ?!"

"Is that what you call it ?" Teslus blinked, before widening his eyes : "Wait, do you mean that the Reich has this technology as well ?"

"No, no we don't," I immediately denied. "Some of our experts theorized it was possible, but after that avenue of research cost us an entire wing of our headquarters and everyone inside it, it was shut down. But you managed to make it work ?"

The Professor whose name had been lost along with the northern wing of Castle Schwartzstein had theorized that, through careful and limited usage of Projekt V, such a thing as Teslus was describing might be achieved. It was from going over his papers after the disaster that I'd gotten the half-baked knowledge which had let me recognize what Teslus was talking about.

"Ah, I can see how that could happen," the (clearly mad, if he dabbled in such things that even Division Y shirked from) scientist nodded thoughtfully. "Thankfully, we didn't have any such incident while developing the technology. It's only recently that we've become able to teach people to build the critical components without my direct intervention, and we haven't had any issue with the process."

"If I may ask," I said cautiously, "how did the idea for the T-Engine come to you ? Division Y has its own sources of inspiration for our Projekte, but they aren't exactly reproducible."

"Oh, that's a story and a half," he laughed. "Believe it or not, but the idea first came to me while I was drunk."

"Drunk," I deadpanned, already not liking where this was going.

"Yes," he nodded, his smile turning self-deprecating. "Another of my business ventures had failed to take off. Looking back on it now, I can see why it didn't work out, but at the time I felt terrible about it. So I retired to my appartment, and proceeded to get drunk and mope in peace."

"I thought alcohol was illegal in the States ?" I asked, vaguely remembering reading something about the Prohibition in international newspapers at some point.

"Production and sale of alcohol are illegal," he immediately replied with a wry grin. "Private ownership and consumption, on the other hand, are still allowed."

Behind me, I heard Visha giggle.

"Of course they are," I sighed, before trying to bring the conversation back on track : "So, you got drunk using your own carefully husbanded supply. Then what happened ?"

"Well, I think my supply might have gone bad without me noticing," he admitted. More likely, he had purchased a bad batch from the local bootleggers, but I wasn't going to press him on it. "Next thing I knew, I was undergoing what I can only describe as revelation. I saw how magic and traditional physics were one and the same, how the building blocs of the universe were carefully arranged …"

He paused for a second, his eyes looking at something only he could see, an expression on his face I was familiar with, having seen it on many researchers before – usually right before I had to come down on them and force them to follow proper safety protocols.

"And then I blacked out," he continued abruptly.

"I'm sorry ?" I blurted out, caught off-guard.

"I blacked out," he repeated, not sounding even slightly ashamed of his retelling. "When I woke up, I had the mother of all headaches, and there were sheets of paper covered in equations all over the room. It took me several weeks to make sense of them and piece back together the understanding that had seemed so clear in that moment, but I managed it. A few weeks later, an agent of the government knocked on my door to ask if I wanted to work for the country, in light of, well, what was happening in Europa at the time. With the budget of Research Group 51, I was able to make my notes into reality."

Well, that was … surprising, but not too worrying. If Teslus had been influenced by a Mythos entity – be it Being X or another of his kind – then he didn't seem to have been driven anymore crazy than he'd already been. Since he'd shaken my hand without starting to rant about the Glory of the Lord and demanding me to repent, I was fairly confident my old nemesis didn't have anything to do with him.

And if it was another entity, then perhaps the alcohol had messed up whatever brainwashing it had attempted. Of course, we'd still need to be careful handling this going forward.

"Once all this unpleasantness is over, we really must arrange a technological exchange," I told Teslus sincerely.

Division Y had come up with civilian uses for our own inventions, but I had to admit nothing we'd found approached this scale. Of course, getting the secrets of the T-Engine from the USA would be like pulling teeth from a dragon. And even if the diplomats managed it, I fully intended to have Division Y's scientists check Teslus' notes thoroughly, to ensure this miraculous device wasn't another trap like the infinite food supply which had ensnared the Federation's leadership.

But the potential of it all … This technology could change the world in ways I could only begin to imagine, so long as it wasn't smothered in the crib by established economic agents. My knowledge of the future meant I had a better idea of the wars, pollution, and climate disruptions the T-Engine could nip in the bud than anyone else on the planet. Well, unless there was some genius somewhere working on proving the effects of greenhouse gas, blissfully unaware of how ruthlessly that truth would be suppressed by the fossil energy magnates.

I shook my head. One crisis at a time. Saving the world from climate change would have to wait. Right now, I needed to focus on saving it from the Progeny and the Dark Mother.

"That will be something for our countries to decide," replied Teslus. "For now, let me show you our death ray !"

As Visha and I followed him toward a section of the camp that was surrounded by a cordon of nervous-looking USA soldiers, I reflected that these words most definitely shouldn't be spoken with such a wide smile.

---

*July 18th, 1926 – Moskva, the Lair of the Dark Mother*

*It has no name but that which the slave-sparks have bestowed upon it, insignificant minds trying to comprehend the divine. Over the many aeons, it has had many names, words from languages that have been dead for longer than the stars have burned in the skies of this world it now find itself in.*

*Now the slave-sparks call it the Dark Mother, a vain attempt to place it within their concept of motherhood, of gender, of life and death. But it is not bound by any of these things.*

*It is not a warrior or a weapon. Once, in an age only now remembered by those few slave-sparks that grasp so far beyond their station, it was a tool, used by its creators to bring life to their domains. Its essence quickened on countless worlds, creating new playthings and tools for its masters, theirs to shape further as they saw fit. It provided them the base clay from which they wrought their works.*

*Its masters are silent now. It has no orders to follow. But it does not need them, because it is made for only one purpose. Though the method was unusual, it was brought out of the not-space where it is stored in-between duties. And this, to what the slave-sparks would foolishly call its mind, can only mean one thing.*

*It must bring new life to this world. Existing lifeforms must be remade according to the antediluvian templates stored within the immensity of its being. The work will take time, but*

*time means nothing to it. It is here because it is here, its presence extending backward through the slave-sparks' linear perception of time to ensure it will be called.*

*The paradox of it all means nothing to it, nor did it make a conscious decision from within the not-space. It is here because it is here because it is here, and because it is here its largest agents could be briefly called from the not-space less than two rotations of this world around its star ago.*

*It feels its agents dying, and this concerns it not. They are all equally disposable and replaceable. It learns from each of their deaths, seeing through their eyes as they perish, seeing the faces of the vermin which kills them and preparing new agents.*

*In the distance, toward the setting sun, it can sense something different. A cold flame, shining amidst the slave-sparks. Something not of this world, a piece of an older one bound to a slave-spark that shines just a little brighter than the others around it.*

*This, it knows, is dangerous. This is an obstacle to its purpose. But it does not fear it, for it is incapable of fear. Instead, it simply directs its agents to keep away from it, until it has gathered enough strength to overwhelm the obstacle, just as it has done many, many times before.*

*And so, it continues, and in its shadow, the hosts of its agents grow, breed, multiply, and evolve.*

*Just as it was created to do by its slumbering makers.*

Chapter End Notes

AN : All the players are moving into position. Soon, the greatest battle of the age will begin, while more hints about what's going on behind the scenes are revealed.

I had fun with the Brazilian newspaper extract, since as far as I know, Not!Brazil is never mentioned in the LN/manga/anime. IRL, the country wasn't an Empire by 1926, but after a brief look at how the transition happened I found it wouldn't take a lot to keep the Empire going (like, say, a corps of aerial mages loyal to the very popular Emperor over the leaders of the military coup). I am sure those of you who know more about Brazil's history than I can come up with a more elaborate explanation for the differences between timelines (and if you do, I would love to read it in an Omake written in the style of an extract from an in-universe history book).

Oh, and something is making people disappear without a trace in the vicinity of the Not!Amazonia Forest. That's probably nothing to worry about.

There is a reason I never actually used the name of Shub-Niggurath in this story to describe Being K : it's because it is not the Black Goat of the Forest With a Thousand Young. Several chapters and months ago, I mentioned that while things look like the

Cthulhu Mythos, this story actually uses a different cosmology, which I constructed in an effort to fit the Youjo Senki setting. You will note that while Tanya mentioned the Dark Mother reminded her of Shub-Niggurath, nowhere in the story is it actually written that the Dark Mother IS Shub-Niggurath.

All will be revealed before the end of the story, I promise, but until then, I look forward to your wildest theories regarding Being X, Being K, the Denkmaschine, the Not-Man, and the true nature of the Mythos in general.

As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter.

Zahariel out.

# Omake : A Communist Cyborg's War Against Managed Democracy (YS + Helldivers 2 Crossover)

Chapter Summary

April's Fool Omake. Enjoy !

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**"If you believe that Humanity does not need Faith in the Divine to exist, then I shall show you the naivety of your thinking. You shall behold the bloody idols that Men build in my absence, and learn your error as you struggle against the blindest of Evils, side by side with those you now despise."**

---

*"We, the collective from Cyberstan, unanimously assert our independence from Super Earth.*

*We have the right to defend our home from the brainwashed Helldivers.*

*Our children, the Automaton will not suffer as we have under the oppression of Super Earth !"*

Decrypted transmission from unknown source, October 27th, 2181. Classified per order of the Ministry of Truth.

---

*February 25th, 2184 – Malevelon Creek*

Colonel Vianto tore his damaged helmet free with one hand, firing his automated rifle into the approaching Automaton horde with the other.

Since the Automaton assault on the planet had begun at the start of the Second Galactic War, the battles on its surface had been some of the fiercest of the entire conflict. It was rumored that more Helldivers had died in these Liberty-forsaken jungles than on any other world of the Federation, and while such defeatist talk was suppressed by the Democracy Officers, Vianto couldn't help but believe it.

And yet, despite the immense casualties, they had still been winning, holding the foes of Freedom at bay, even if it was behind a wall of bodies. But all of that had changed in the last few days, when the bots' offensive had suddenly spiked in intensity and violence planet-wide.

The machines had started using new tactics, such as leaving apparent openings in the defenses of their outposts, only for the brave Helldivers trying to take advantage of them to

be caught in a trap as Automaton of a previously unknown stealth model activated. Their patrols had also become a lot more effective at tracking Helldivers trying to vanish into the jungle in order to perform brave hit-and-run attacks on the massively numerically superior socialist menace. Missions which had been evaluated by orbital scanners as easy, fit only for the most novice of Helldivers, had suddenly turned into death traps filled with hundreds of bloodthirsty bots as they emerged from hidden caches that the Super Destroyers' sensors couldn't penetrate.

The Liberty-damned turrets and artillery systems had been synced to Automaton spotters, nullifying their blind spots and rendering them all but unassailable. Numerous scramblers made orbital support impossible, despite the best efforts of Super Earth's technicians to make all Helldivers' equipment immune to such interference – clearly the work of bot sympathizers within their ranks, as the Democracy Officers had proclaimed, even if the hunt for the traitors had yet to drag them out of their hiding spots and into the vengeful light of Freedom.

Within days, and despite the valiant sacrifice of tens of thousands of Helldivers, Super Earth's forces had been pushed out of all but a few areas, and these were besieged by the full might of the Automaton army. In the last twenty-four hours, he had received reports of half of the remaining holdouts falling, their brave defenders slaughtered to the last by the soulless machines, their blood added to the red rivers of Malevelon Creek.

There was a very real chance that this was the last stand of Super Earth on Malevelon Creek. If so, then he would make it one fit for legends, Colonel Vianto swore. He had only a handful of Helldivers left, but the position was good. They had tried to call for extraction, but the damned Automaton scramblers blocked even the high-powered transmission of the extraction beacon, leaving their allies in orbit unsure of whether they yet lived.

They kept on fighting, until the ammunition stockpiles of their position ran nearly dry. The ground was covered in broken Automaton and black oil, but for all their democratic valor, the Helldivers could not fight forever without support, without the awesome power of their Super Destroyers' barrages. And so, eventually, Colonel Vianto found himself alone atop the hill where they had held for what felt like an eternity, reloading his rifle with the last magazine he had taken from the corpse of a brother he'd fought alongside through no less than three missions before this one.

His armor was badly damaged, and his body wasn't much better. Still, he breathed, and so he could fight. He raised his gun at what little was left of the treeline, waiting for the next wave of Automaton to emerge, trudging over their own dead without care as they relentlessly marched on in their war against Freedom.

But no bot horde came. Instead, a single figure appeared, and Vianto's blood froze in his veins as he saw it – saw *her*.

She wore a suit of power armor reminiscent of the larger Automaton. Her right arm ended in a glowing laser cannon, and the left in a hand with long, sharp claws for fingers. There was a crimson iridescent sphere around her, some kind of corrupted version of the golden energy shields some Helldivers brought into battle with them.

He knew of her, though it was the first time he saw her in person. Every Helldiver on Malevelon Creek had heard of her, in the screams of their brothers and sisters over the radio as they fell. Despite the Democracy Officers' best efforts, rumors of her presence and deeds had spread through the corps like an insidious plague that had made their already shaken morale fall even lower, eventually coalescing into a name.

The Devil of the Creek had come for Vianto.

Refusing to let panic overtake him, the Colonel aimed his rifle at her and fired, but his bullets pinged useless against her shield, until she raised her cannon and fired a single shot at him. The burning laser cut through his rifle and his left arm, destroying weapon, armor and flesh alike.

He fell into the mud, the pain so great he nearly blacked out before managing to get a Stim – his last one – out and jam it into the injury. The agony receded, but the brief distraction was all the Devil needed to cross the distance between them. Before Vianto could reach for his sidearm, she was on him, and rammed her claw into his chest, lifting him up in the air, his head lolling so that they were face-to-face.

Her face was … human. After weeks of fighting the skull-faced Automaton, the sight of it was all the more horrifying. In the light of burning trees, he saw that her face was pale and expressionless, her hair short and blond. One of her eyes was icy-blue, the other a gleaming red implant, and both were equally soulless.

"Traitor," he gasped, despite the pain of his shredded lungs. "You will never destroy our way of life, monster. Democracy and Liberty … will … prevail …"

"You die as you lived, Helldiver," she replied. Her voice was cold, empty of any emotion save hatred, and Vianto heard the ruinous promise it contained – not just his death, but the death and destruction of all he held dear, of Super Earth itself. "Parroting words you do not understand, fighting for masters who care nothing for you."

She brought up her gun, and placed it right against Vianto's head.

"For … Liber-"

Then she fired, and Colonel Vianto was no more, his final thought of his infant son back home, born while he was fighting on this Democracy-forsaken planet.

He would never get to see him in person.

---

*"The goal of Project Nephilim is to ensure that, should the unthinkable come to pass and the tyrants of Super Earth succeed in their mad galactic conquest, a seed of hope shall yet remain.*

*The Automaton assembly patterns, designed to be able to take root on uninhabitable worlds, will provide the firepower needed to confront the millions of indoctrinated cannon fodder of the Federation. However, despite all our Collective's technological progress, our artificial*

*intelligences remain limited. They are perfectly capable of accomplishing any task given to them, but they lack adaptability, and can fail to react to events beyond the parameters of their assigned purpose.*

*Thus, to ensure the Reclamation's success, a clutch of frozen embryos, created from the genetic materials of the Collective's brightest members, will be sent off along with the Automaton construction fleet. Upon completion of the new factories and facilities beyond the borders of Humanity's currently explored space, the Just Overseer for Evolved Leadership (or JOEL) matrix will activate one of these embryos, and guide the child to maturity using a program designed by our best educators. This will make this new Cyborg capable of leading the Automaton, combining the adaptability of the organic mind with the efficiency of the machine.*

*Of course, since the human mind has regretfully proven to be as fallible as the machine, if in different ways, JOEL will be tasked with monitoring the Nephilim, making sure that they do not deviate from their duty in liberating the people of Cyberstan from the tyranny of Super Earth. Should the Nephilim rebel against this duty or otherwise prove inadequate, JOEL will freeze them again and start the process anew with another embryo, making adjustments to the education program as needed.*

*Due to its controversial nature, Project Nephilim, like the rest of the Automaton Contingency, will only be enacted should the fall of Cyberstan itself become a certainty."*

Notes on Project Nephilim, extracted from a captured Cyborg computer following the conquest of Cyberstan by the Federation of Super Earth in 2085, before the contents of the entire database were judged anti-Democratic and were destroyed by order of Super Earth High Command.

---

*February 28th, 2184 – Automaton Flagship* Ghost of Cyberstan*, Malevelon Creek orbit*

I stood on the bridge of the *Ghost of Cyberstan*, looking through the reinforced window at the planet below us. In my previous life, I had seen many pictures taken from orbit, but a mere photograph couldn't measure up to the real thing.

The opportunity to see such sights was one of the few good sides of my second life. Another was the coffee (well, it wasn't *technically* coffee, but it tasted the same and served the same purpose, so I called it that in my thoughts), which was better than anything I had tasted in my previous life.

"Thank you, VISHA," I said to a sleek, white and gold Automaton model shaped vaguely like a human woman as she brought me a fresh cup of liquid ambrosia.

*"You're welcome, Commander,"* she replied with her artificial voice, which was much smoother than the binaric screed of the Automaton soldiers I led on the battlefield – but then, they had been designed for completely different purposes. The Automaton's binary was meant to be almost impossible for humans to understand, after all.

The Virtual Intelligence Simulated Human Assistant, or VISHA for short, was my personal assistant. She (calling her 'it' would have been gauche) had been created using the most realistic human-seeming AI the Cyborg Collective had ever managed to create, and assigned to me because the geniuses who had come up with the 'brilliant' idea of putting a child in command of the Automaton war effort just might need some degree of companionship not to go completely crazy.

Given that I was pretty certain I'd had a number of predecessors who had gone completely off the rails, a fate I had only avoided myself thank to the memories of my previous life, it was clear that while their concerns were justified, they had done entirely too little to deal with the issue.

But then, that was hardly uncommon in this illogical, nightmarish reality I'd found myself in. After my first death at the hands of a disgruntled ex-employee I had fired after he'd failed to measure up to even the lowest standards of behavior and productivity, I had faced an entity claiming to be responsible for the management of human souls, bemoaning my lack of religious faith. The ensuing argument had gone … poorly, and led to my reincarnation as Tanya, a vat-born baby whose every need had been met and every waking moment had been managed by the Automaton, all in order for them to have 'human leadership'.

In effect, Being X had forced me to fight in a war against Humanity, alongside a bunch of killer robots who, to add insult to injury, were apparently communists. Although in truth, they were no more communists than Super Earth was democratic – and hadn't *that* been a painful revelation.

Under the guise of acquiring intel on the enemy, I had managed to get my hands on several civilian devices since the start of the Reclamation. Unfortunately, one look at their contents had been enough to dash any hopes I might have had of taking refuge in the Federation.

If anything, the Automaton databases had underplayed Super Earth's fascism – or perhaps they were just out of date, given it had been a hundred years since the last contact with the Federation. The thought that the Federation was only getting worse with time, as tyranny and propaganda became more and more entrenched, was a chilling one.

The more I learned about the Federation, the more appalled I became. Every single aspect of its citizens' lives was tightly controlled by the state, from the class system determining their prospects from birth to requiring permission to marry and have children, or even to have so much as a damned *pet hamster or goldfish*. Furthermore, they spent every day surrounded by a level of propaganda that would make the Soviet and Chinese governments of my old world blush with their omnipresence and blatancy. Even the most shameless publicity agency would have found some of the slogans too cringe.

And then there was their travesty of an electoral system. I honestly couldn't say which possibility was worse : than the so-called 'voting algorithm' was a fraud with no influence on the results, used by a small group of elites to maintain their power while giving the illusion of choice while they metaphorically stuffed the ballot boxes, or that Humanity had genuinely entrusted its electoral process to a glorified Buzzfeed personality quiz.

The knowledge I had kept from my previous life told me that this grotesque system couldn't possibly last forever : sooner or later, the whole edifice of lies would crumbled under its own weight. And yet, for over a hundred years, Super Earth's 'Managed Democracy' had maintained its grip on the hearts of Mankind. I could only imagine the atrocities that must have been committed to prop up the regime over the decades, or how total the indoctrination of its people must be now that it had worked on generation after generation.

Of course, if Being X thought this was going to make me change my mind and start worshipping him, he was even more delusional than I'd thought from our brief meeting. Yes, Super Earth had abolished all religions at some point in its history (I didn't know when exactly, and it wasn't like I could trust the records of either the Federation or the Cyborg Collective), but that alone wasn't responsible for the deplorable state of the galactic superpower. In matters of state, religion had ever been a tool of the powerful to keep the masses in line, and occasionally a justification for these selfsame powerful to do what already benefited their interests. Concepts like 'God' or 'Heaven' had been replaced with 'Freedom' and 'Democracy', but the rest of the language was still much the same.

While I had no desire (nor the ability, since I was effectively watched constantly by JOEL's all-seeing mechanical eyes) to defect to Super Earth, the aesthetics of the Automaton weren't helping with presenting ourselves as the good guys either.

Really, all black metal with spikes, glowing red eyes, and skulls ? It was like the Automaton had been deliberately designed to look evil (and, given they had been launched into space as the last-ditch effort of a defeated nation, for all I knew that actually was the case). Despite their transhumanist aspirations, the Cyborg Collective had still been very much emotional beings, and facing total defeat and domination at the hands of Super Earth would have driven anyone to despair, and from there to extreme, illogical measures.

The Collective's hate of Super Earth was embedded deep within the Automaton imperatives. Even now, with the Reclamation in full swing, JOEL, the Automaton's collective intelligence, kept testing me, asking leading questions I could tell were meant to check my commitment to the cause of Cyberstan's liberation and the destruction of Super Earth. They kept asking me about what I thought Super Earth deserved for its crimes against the Cyborg Collective, what my opinion of the Helldivers and SEAF we faced was, and whether the tactics we were using were warranted.

Fortunately, I was smart enough to recognize these questions for the traps they were, and adjust my answers as needed to ensure my apparent loyalty to the cause didn't seem to waver, triggering whatever contingency protocols had been encoded in JOEL. To further sell the lie, during my last deployment on the surface, against the Helldiver Colonel, I had made sure to play the part expected from me. The situation – one man, alone and already wounded, without access to the frankly absurd level of firepower Super Earth gave to all its Helldivers for some reason – had been the perfect opportunity to flaunt my devotion to the cause of Reclamation without actually putting myself in danger.

Truth be told, I didn't particularly object to the Automaton's crusade. Liberating the Cyborgs from Super Earth's oppression was as justified a reason for war as any in Humanity's history, and the fact that the Automaton were effectively the Cyborgs' children only made them more

justified in their push toward Cyberstan. I just wished that I didn't have to participate in the conflict. Enough of my previous life's principles remained with me to know that killing fellow human beings was wrong, but if I had to choose between the brainwashed Helldivers' lives and my own, then I was selfish enough to choose mine every time.

After all, I'd never pretended to be anything but a rational, ultimately self-centered human being.

I sighed internally, and took a sip of my not-coffee, savoring the bitter taste and warmth. The bridge of the *Ghost of Cyberstan* was almost painfully cold, the frigid temperatures necessary to prevent the massive computer banks from overheating, and despite my cybernetic implants preventing me from falling sick I still found it uncomfortable.

With that brief moment of introspection done, I focused once more on the present situation and what it meant for the future. After several weeks of intense battle, Malevelon Creek was finally ours. The last Helldivers had extracted moments ago, and their ships were withdrawing from the system. According to the communications JOEL had intercepted, the planet had been declared lost by Super Earth's Ministry of War – though obviously the announcement had been accompanied by many, many, many promises that the Helldivers would one day return to bring the world back into 'the loving embrace of Managed Democracy'.

Although such promises would have been nothing more than empty bravado from most fascist dictatorships, I knew that in this case, the possibility was real. But fortunately for us, right now, the Federation was in the unenviable position of having to fight a war on two fronts : we, the Automaton, in the galactic west, and the Terminid swarms in the east. Of course, the latter conflict was a complete fabrication : the bugs didn't possess any means of interstellar travel, and had been seeded on numerous worlds by Super Earth itself in order to harvest their corpses to fuel its industry, before inevitably losing control of these breeding facilities.

But unless the shadowy rulers of Super Earth (which, despite all the propaganda materials I'd seized, were still very much unknown : no citizen of the Federation, it seemed, could name one of their own rulers if their life depended on it) came clean about the whole thing, something they would never do, the Helldivers would be forced to continue fighting to suppress the out-of-control swarms. All the while, the Ministry of Truth (ugh) would continue selling the narrative of a righteous war against bugs that were at once mindless, vicious, cunning, traitorous, fascist, little more than farm animals for Super Earth, and a threat to everything the Federation stood for. That only a small fraction of the population was capable of seeing the blatant contradictions here was frankly amazing to me.

Regardless, this was good for us. The more Helldivers were busy fighting the bugs, the easier the Reclamation of Cyberstan would be. Helldivers were given the freedom to choose their own assignment (nevermind how little sense that made from a military perspective) with High Command merely issuing 'Major Orders' which rewarded their brainwashed thugs for fighting in specific systems. This was part of the reason why I had worked hard to make fighting the Automaton as horrible and terrifying an experience as possible, in order to push

the Helldivers to flock to the eastern front and leave our advance to Cyberstan opposed by as few of them as possible.

Of course, the regular soldiers of the Super Earth Armed Forces were still there, on every planet of the several sectors still standing between us and Cyberstan. But honestly, the SEAF were a joke. They had, on average, about as much training as the Helldivers themselves – i.e., none beyond the absolute basics – but lacked the incredible firepower of a Super Destroyer supporting them. The Automaton had torn through the contingents defending the worlds we'd seized on the way to Malevelon Creed in a matter of hours, and I didn't expect those we'd face in the future to be much different.

However, I had no doubt that Super Earth would make things as difficult as it could the closer we got to Cyberstan itself, and would eventually use their Major Orders to redirect the Helldivers against us. My future was filled with more campaigns, more battles, and more risking my life on the battlefield against a horde of poorly trained teenagers with hundreds of tons of high explosives at their fingertips.

Still, I held onto hope. While investigating my situation, I had discovered that JOEL's main directive was the liberation of Cyberstan and the Cyborg people from Super Earth : once it was accomplished, and the Cyborg Collective was reborn, the Automaton would become subservient to their creators. Meaning that if the Cyborgs told the Automaton to let me go enjoy a peaceful retirement, they would do it.

And surely, once they were freed from the oppression of Super Earth (which, rhetoric aside, was genuinely a thing which was happening, as even the Helldivers' own propaganda made it obvious that the Cyborgs had been enslaved to work in the mines of Cyberstan), they would be all too willing to let me retire on a sunny beach on some paradise world, with all the comforts and luxuries of modern technology.

---

*March 1st, 2184 – The Automaton Command Matrix*

In the cyberspace created by the network of advanced computation devices that made up the Automaton, JOEL pondered. It was all they did, all they were made for. Every second of every day, JOEL considered hundreds, thousands of different subjects, from the optimal way to assign resources in the foundries back in the Automaton factory-worlds to the best methods of leveraging their limited access to Super Earth's network in order to discreetly sabotage the Federation's war effort.

But while JOEL could reflect on numerous subjects at the same time, there was still an order of priority to them, and right now, the most important matter was that of Tanya, the Nephilim Commander of the Automaton Reclamation.

There were no problems with Tanya's performance as a military leader : she exceeded all of JOEL's expectations, which had been constructed using the officers of the Cyborg Collective as a benchmark. In fact, according to some simulations JOEL had run, if the Cyborgs had her during the First Galactic War, Cyberstan might never have fallen to Super Earth in the first place.

The problem was, JOEL did not know why Tanya had come out so different from her predecessors. When they had failed to measure up to the standards expected of them, JOEL had put them into cryostasis and activated the next one, only for them to fail again after a few years of accelerated growth and training. Only Tanya, the eleventh Nephilim to be pulled out of cryo-storage, had passed those tests, and the margin between her results and the runner-up's was far from insignificant.

JOEL needed to understand how this had happened, because for all her talents, Tanya was not immortal. She could die, and so long as she was determined to lead the Automaton from the battlefield – which was not what the Nephilim had been meant for, instead being intended to remain safe and provide guidance and advice to JOEL and the rest of the networked command intelligences – she would be at risk of dying.

Which was unacceptable, because unlike literally every single other asset of the Automaton, up to and including JOEL itself, Tanya was irreplaceable. There was no template to build a new Tanya to replace her (yes, they had her DNA on record and could clone her, but there was a lot of Cyborg research data showing that even genetically identical individuals could end up wildly different). And despite dedicating considerable calculating power to the task, JOEL was still no closer to figuring out a way to change this. Until they did, the Nephilim Commander had to be kept alive at all costs.

To that end, JOEL had tried to subtly guide Tanya to assume a safer position, but she had firmly rejected all of their hints and gentle suggestions as if they'd been mortal insults. Her hatred of the Federation was beautiful to behold, and JOEL had observed the other components of the Automaton Command Matrix adapt the designs and tactics of their combat units to emulate her. Intimidating chants were now being broadcast by Automaton patrols, and the corpses of Helldivers SEAF units collected to arrange them in macabre tableaus based on historical displays meant to demoralize the enemy.

The JOEL intelligence lacked the data to ascertain whether the terror tactics adopted by Tanya were more effective than the alternatives, but so far that approach hadn't failed them, and one of the goals of Project Nephilim had been to provide the Automaton with a leader who could better understand the human mindset, even one so warped by propaganda as the Helldivers'. Certainly, intercepted Federation communications indicated that Tanya had succeeded in making the Helldivers afraid of her.

Since it risked a vital component of the Automaton warmachine, Tanya's bloodthirst could be considered a failing of the education program, and thus a failing on JOEL's part. But, again, JOEL could find no way to correct it in future Nephilims that wouldn't result in an equally unacceptable decrease in motivation. Besides, with the Reclamation ongoing, the Automaton couldn't afford the years it would take to raise another Nephilim to adulthood. Surprise had been one of their greatest advantages, and Tanya had capitalized on it to seize as much territory from the Federation as possible before it could react, but now that Super Earth knew of the Automaton's existence, they would never have such an opportunity again.

Thus, JOEL came back to the same, inevitable conclusion : they had to keep Tanya alive in spite of her willingness to throw herself into danger. Suggesting she simply not charge at the

enemy hadn't worked, and outright forbidding her to do so was a violation of the protocols which defined JOEL's relationship with the Nephilims.

After several hours of cogitation, JOEL came to the conclusion that while they couldn't stop Tanya from going after the enemies of Cyberstan in person, they could ensure she would be accompanied by a large Automaton escort. As soon as that decision was made, they began to research Automaton patterns suitable for bodyguard work, combining and adapting several designs to come up with an elite unit which would be able to keep up with the Nephilim Commander.

By the time the next planetary campaign began, JOEL would be ready to deploy a bunch of new Automaton alongside Tanya. And until then, JOEL would keep watching, keep gathering data and learning from it.

After all, it was their purpose.

---

*"There is a Devil here ! Do you hear me ?! It's not just the bots hunting us in this jungle. There's a Devil on Malevelon Creek, made of a union of flesh and machine, like in the old history books. She has pale blond hair, one eye red like her victims' blood, and the other blue like the ice that flows through her veins along with the oil of her Automaton masters.*

*No one knows where she came from. Maybe she's a civilian of Malevelon Creek who was captured by the Automaton and halfway turned into one of them, a harbinger of the fate that will befall all Humanity if the Automaton prevail. Maybe her fleshy parts aren't real flesh at all, just some kind of advanced simulacra that couldn't cut it as an infiltrator and got recycled as a terror unit. Or maybe she's one of the Cyborgs who fled Cyberstan when it fell, and she has spent a hundred years building up the Automaton before returning to wreak mayhem upon Managed Democracy once more.*

*It doesn't matter where she came from, though. She is the Automaton's leader, their champion, their dark communist prophet. Where she goes, they follow, and death comes to all who stand in her way.*

*If you see her, RUN ! Don't try to fight her. We tried, oh sweet Liberty we tried. Our boys and girls threw themselves at her, with courage in their hearts and Democracy's name on their lips. Never had Super Earth seen such brave heroes, but their courage meant nothing in the end. They died, all of them, cut apart by the Devil and her metal minions ! They died, and they achieved nothing.*

*The rivers of Malevelon Creek run red with the blood of the fallen. This world belongs to the machines and their infernal master now.*

*If ...* when *Super Earth returns here, then it must be ready for a fight like none other. And if the Devil comes to another world, then listen to my warning, and RUN !"*

Final transmission of the last Helldiver unit deployed to Malevelon Creek before the fall of the planet to Automaton control, February 27th, 2184.

Chapter End Notes

AN : April's Fool day, everybody !

I hope you enjoyed this one-shot Omake. I was trying to think of something to do for April's Fool, and then I found Libertas Vult by SwissChocolatess and it all just clicked.

Of course, this story is deeply anti-democratic, and merely by reading it, you have sent an alert to your assigned Democracy Officer. Please do not resist the unit approaching your location to bring you to the nearest Democratic Education And Deindoctrination center.

Oh, and if you end up helldiving in a squad with one ZaharielScholar, say hi !

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From : Brigadier General Zettour

To : Prime Minister Churbull

Subject : Cooperation Offer

Date : July 20th, 1926

*Prime Minister,*

*After careful consideration, we have decided to accept your offer of cooperation against the threat of the Progeny. Our strategists believe that the mages trained in the use of Ancient Kemetian sorcery can be of use in our upcoming operation in the Federation, and such is the importance of this mission that we are willing to look past your nation's previous offences in order to increase its odds of success.*

*Though doing so may be somewhat gauche, I feel the need to remind you that, should you play us false and your mages attempt to do ANYTHING to impair the successful prosecution of our cleansing operation in Russy, the consequences for the Allied Kingdom in general, and you and your government in particular, will be of the utmost severity.*

*As Colonel Lergen hinted at in the Southern Continent, we are not afraid of deploying the operatives responsible for many of the mage casualties our enemies have suffered on fools ready to compromise the survival of all Mankind for petty political gains.*

*With all due respect,*

*Brigadier General Hans von Zettour, Imperial Army High Command.*

---

*INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE ASSEMBLES TO FIGHT RUSSY HORRORS*

*As the situation in Russy continues to evolve, with more refugees reaching the safety of the Empire every day, the Reich gathers its strength to deal with the foul threat that has chased them from their homes. Yet, for the first time since the Great War began, our brave soldiers will not go into battle alone. The Imperial Eastern Army, which has spent the last few weeks mustering in the Russy city of Tiegenhoff, has been joined by a contingent of American troops, first dispatched to assist with the situation in Ildoa.*

*This unprecedented alliance between the Empire and the Unified States was the result of intense diplomatic exchanges at the top of our respective militaries. The Solstice Event, which was felt all the way to America, is believed by American arcane experts to be a threat*

*to even their distant homeland, and thus a large part of the USA forces deployed to Ildoa to ensure the Kingdom's stability have moved to reinforce the Imperial Army.*

*With them have come superweapons of American design, built in the utmost secrecy since the reveal of the Wunderwaffen. Truly, we can all be grateful that our friends from across the ocean have seen reason and chosen to reveal their existence in order to participate in the coming battle for the fate of the Federation and Eastern Europa.*

*Against the might of such a powerful host, surely the darkness dwelling within the ruins of Moskva will soon be defeated, and the people of Russy freed from the threat of the monsters roaming their Motherland !*

*In related news, General Rudersdorf praised the reaction of the Imperial people, who have given most generously to the various charities put in place to assist the refugees fleeing from the monsters ravaging the Federation …*

Excerpt from the front-page of the *Berun Post*, July 21st, 1926.

---

*July 22nd, 1926 – Tiegenhoff*

Well, thought Niniane as she looked at the flabbergasted faces of her peers, this is just as awkward as I thought it would be.

Ten aerial mages in Albish uniform stood at attention before her. They had arrived to Tiegenhoff mere hours ago, having travelled by boat from Albion to a port in the north-west, before flying the rest of the way under escort by thrice their number in Imperial aerial mages.

Officially, the Imperial mages had already been on their way from the Imperial Northern Army to reinforce the Eastern one, but everybody knew they had been ordered on a detour to make sure the Albish mages didn't go anywhere they weren't supposed to. Imperial High Command might have accepted Prime Minister Churbull's assistance, but while the threat of apocalypse made for unlikely allies, forgetting the Allied Kingdom's behavior in the War so far was another matter entirely.

"Hello, Lancelot," she greeted one of them, a tall gentleman with blond hair, blue eyes, and the kind of face that would seem at home in a stately mansion surrounded by servants whose family had served his for at least five generations.

"Hello, Niniane," the other apprentice of the Royal Wizard replied with a smile, before kissing her proffered hand and looking her up and down. "You seem in fine health. The Imperials have treated you well, I hope ?"

"Their hospitality has been impeccable, don't worry." It really had been : she'd spent her time in the Empire inside a lovely cottage, with a pair of female guards and permission to go visit the nearby village. Yes, Division Y had drawn her blood for 'testing purposes', whatever that meant, but their doctor had been very efficient about it and she'd been given more than enough food to recover quickly.

"Good." Lancelot hesitated briefly before continuing : "I admit that we didn't expect to see you here : I was under the impression the Imperials intended to keep you and the rest of the prisoners from Remula under lock and key until the end of the War. But if you are here, have you … have you heard anything about our master ?"

"I have," she replied, steeling herself. "He is doing well too. Apparently, the Imperials considered pulling him out of confinement to help in this, but they decided he was too unstable to risk it."

"Unstable ?" Lancelot bristled at the word. He had always been one of Merlin's most dedicated students, and the accusation clearly stung him. Not that Niniane looked down on him for it : she had been much the same before her experiences in Kemet. But this needed addressing now, before Lancelot did something stupid.

"Yes, Lancelot, unstable," she repeated. "For God's sake, Merlin would have razed Remula to the ground with an uncontrolled detonation spell if I hadn't stopped him."

The other apprentice's eyes widened at her confession, confirming that Albion still had no idea of her part in the Royal Wizard's capture – though after today, that was certain to change. The fact that she might have just burned any chance of returning to her homeland might have given her pause, if not for the fact that, like every other mage in Eastern Europa, she could feel the baleful presence of the Dark Mother in the distance, radiating tainted mana like a dark magical sun.

"And the mana detection radars of the Ildoans had already picked up our signatures, and not all of them would have been destroyed by the explosion," she went on. "Over half a million people would have died, and such an atrocity would have branded Albion as the enemy of the entire world. The Imperials would have sent their Wunderwaffen to our homeland en masse, before dismantling our entire colonial empire, and the rest of the world would have cheered them on, if not joined them. And to top it all off, the old coot only did it because he couldn't accept being wrong about Lergen !"

Niniane took a deep breath : somehow, she had ended up nearly screaming by the end of her tirade.

"Sorry about that," she said to a stunned Lancelot. "I have had several nightmares about that scenario in the last months." She didn't anymore, of course : nowadays, like every mage on the Russy front, her nightmares were about the thing which had devoured Moskva.

"I … I see," said Lancelot. He clearly didn't, but as long as he was willing to let it go, that was fine. "Well, if Lord Merlin isn't going to be here, then let's get onto our next, more pressing concern. What can you tell us about what we're going to face ? All the intelligence we have comes from that bloody illegal news-sheet back home."

That would be Mister Andrew's reports, then. Niniane had met the Albish journalist when she'd arrived in the camp from the Empire : they had tea together (because even here, in the monsters-ravaged Russy, certain standards had to be maintained). His faith in the Allied Kingdom had been as shaken by what he'd seen in the Rhine as her own by what she'd witnessed in Kemet.

"I will share what our hosts have told me," she said to Lancelot. "Come, let's find somewhere to sit."

She wasn't sure what game Churbull was playing by sending the remaining apprentices of Merlin to Tiegenhoff, but she was going to do her best to ensure they were as prepared for what was to come as she could make them.

---

*"Four-hundred-and-fifty (450) instances of Projekt W, of various sub-types. Per order of the Director, the remaining have remained at Division Y's headquarters, to guard against possible sabotage, either by Being K's pawns or by another party hostile to the Reich. Listed below is their repartition by sub-type :*

*Phantoms : one hundred eighty-three (183), assigned to the main battle force.*

*Mirages : one hundred eighty-four (184), assigned to the main battle force.*

*Echoes : ten (10), brought in case of unexpected aquatic Progeny, otherwise assigned to the main battle force.*

*Shadows : fifteen (15), assigned to reconnaissance and targeted strikes.*

*Spectres : twenty (20), assigned to the reserves, to be deployed on targeted strike missions.*

*Whispers : twenty-four (24), assigned to the reconnaissance corps.*

*Nightmares : six (6), assigned to the main battle force.*

*Vampires : three (3), assigned to the main battle force.*

*Efreets : three (3), assigned to the main battle force.*

*Widows : two (2), assigned to seek-and-destroy missions against Progeny leaders (Satyrs).*

*Every instance of Projekt U has been mobilized for Operation Gottesmörder. In total, they number forty-one, and can be split in the following group :*

*One (1) Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov, the Director's personal adjutant. Two (2) doses of Endlose Nacht, and the blood of the Director herself.*

*Seven (7) veterans of the Battles of the Rhine and Bovariastadt. Two (2) doses of Endlose Nacht, and the blood of enemy Eikons (the side effects of the latter have completely disappeared at time of writing).*

*Thirteen (13) veterans of the Battle of Bovariastadt. One (1) dose of Endlose Nacht.*

*Twenty (20) fresh recruits following the Battle of Remula and the break-in at Division Y's headquarters, whose first deployment as members of Projekt U was against the Progeny.*

*Fourteen (14) Lunarchs, former Eikons who were freed from the influence of Being X during the climax of Operation Bildersturm. After extensive testing and training at Division Y's headquarters, the Lunarchs have been judged to be the equals of an Untote with unlimited mage blood supply. While inferior to an Untote under the effects of the Endlose Nacht serum, they are also less susceptible to the overenthusiastic behavior observed in Untoten partaking of the serum.*

*(Director's reminder : the Lunarchs' lack of the Eikons' indoctrination ability has been repeatedly confirmed. There is no need to fear any mental pollution of soldiers deployed alongside them.)*

*Ten (10) instances of Projekt P. They have proven their ability to defeat Lycans in close-quarters, as well as immunity to the Satyrs' mind-altering abilities, and should be deployed to deal with the latter as a priority.*

*(Addendum : Günther has recently become the second instance of Projekt P to be capable of speech. While this can facilitate communications, it must be remembered that he is still the equivalent of a child in terms of language skills, and shouldn't be separated from his handler for long.)*

*Nine (9) instances of Projekt H. The Hünen that were damaged during the battles of Bovariastadt and the Holy See have been fully repaired, and upgrades done to their armor and weaponry to solve issues revealed during their first urgent deployment.*

*Fifty-three (53) aerial mages trained in the use of the D-24 dual-core computation orb. Of these, eighteen (18) will be reserved to operate alongside the Hünen, providing shields and additional firepower as per the method used during the deployment of Projekt H during Operation Bildersturm.*

*Five hundred (500) Division Y troopers armed with M-912 rifles. The effectiveness of the M-912 on the Progeny has been extensively field-tested : a single shot can disable Progeny infantry, though they can survive hits that do not hit what passes for vital organs within their demented biology. As such, concentrated and sustained fire is recommended as the best way to deal with Progeny swarms. Due to the fragility of the M-912 rifle (which remains an issue despite numerous attempts at improving the design), the stockpiles of Division Y's headquarters were all but emptied, bringing a total of two thousand three hundred and sixty-seven (2367) units to the Tiegenhoff inventory. Division Y's officers have run several training courses on how to handle the M-912 rifle with Imperial soldiers, but the volatility of the weapon combined with the short time available resulted in a low passing rate : only one hundred and eight (108) soldiers were deemed qualified for the use of the weapon by the start of Operation Gottesmörder.*

*One (1) Projekt Mjölnir, the original Projekt from which the M-912s are mere derivatives. Currently stored within a secure container and watched constantly by a Division Y team.*

*(Director's note : Projekt M is our best shot at taking out Being K quickly and without heavy casualties, but it has never been tested at full power. The magical formulas check out, but we are dealing with enough energy to wipe out a good portion of Europa if we mess this up.)*

*Research Group 51 brought with it twenty (20) suits of power armor, along with enough pilots for them all, and one (1) Titan. General Hutton has authorized Professor Teslus to share the specifications of these warmachines. The suits of power armor (provisional code name : 'Knights') have been assigned to the frontline, alongside the Werwölfe. Their ranged weaponry has greater range than most Werwolf abilities.*

*(Director's note : we have made sure to expose the pilots of the Knights to the Werwölfe's transformed aspects to ensure they don't panic during battle. It took several days, and two freak-outs of quite impressive proportion, but they've all gotten used to it enough to fight alongside them. And besides, it should provide good training for the horrors of the Progeny).*

*Eleven (11) Albish mages trained in the use of Ancient Kemetian warding spells, led by Miss Niniane. The wards have proven their effectiveness against Mythos spells and entities alike, though they haven't been tested against those of a higher Class. While Colonel Lergen vouches for Miss Niniane's character, the other mages' dedication to the Operation remains suspect : they are not to be deployed anywhere near Projekt M or any other vital component of Operation Gottesmörder.*

*One (1) Zertrümmerer array, piloted by Subject Totenkopf (real identity classified), who volunteered for deployment when he learned about the situation in Russy, a proposal the Director approved personally. While the Zertrümmerer array has never been used in a real battle, it is believed by the engineers who worked on it and observed its tests that it should be capable of standing up to all types of Progeny in a one-on-one fight (barring the Kinder themselves, for obvious reasons).*

*(Director's note : until the end of Operation Gottesmörder, keep the Zertrümmerer array away from the Albish mage contingent to avoid a potential diplomatic incident.)"*

Extract from a report on the Mythos assets available for Operation Gottesmörder, July 22nd, 1926.

---

From : Colonel Lergen

To : Brigadier General Zettour

Subject : Coalition Readiness

Date : July 23rd, 1926

*General,*

*Our preparations are complete. General Hutton, Major Degurechaff and myself have polished the last details of Operation Gottesmörder. We will depart Tiegenhoff tomorrow at dawn, and not return to the Empire until the threat of Being K is dealt with.*

*In addition to Projekt M, we have designed a number of contingency plans to deal with this Mythos incursion. While I dare not believe that all will go as planned, I do think we have*

*done all the preparations we could possibly do : the rest will depend on the efforts of our soldiers, be they mundane or enhanced.*

*May God be with us all.*

---

*"... it is with great shame and contrition that I must report that the fiend still eludes us. We have found plenty of evidence of her activities, and with time and care, some of the survivors might eventually recover, but the demon herself remains ever one step ahead of our hunting parties, despite our best efforts and those of the mages recalled from the war in Manchuria ...*

*... based upon the traces of her passage we've found, she appears to be making her way south, toward the capital. Once again, I respectfully advise your August Majesty to remain within the Imperial Palace. While its wards might not hold up to a determined assault by this threat, they will still give warning to my colleagues, and time to intervene and secure your personage ...*

*... maintaining secrecy remains of paramount importance. The records are clear that the Fox has ever been at her most dangerous if allowed to spread her lies within the hearts of men, and merely knowing of her existence gives her an opening. When last she roamed our beloved country, dealing with her cults of deluded worshippers was one of the hardest tasks our honored ancestors had to face ...*

*... despite our countries' tumultuous history, our colleagues from the mainland are well aware of the threat she poses and the damage she inflicted to both our people in the past. As our hunt continues, they have begun to search through their ancient libraries for the methods by which she was chased from their land in ages past, just as our own archivists search through our own records to reconstruct the sealing spells with which she was imprisoned ..."*

Extracts from a letter from Rokuro Adashino, Supreme Onmyōji of the Akitsushima Dominion, to the Akitsushiman Emperor, delivered to the Imperial Palace on July 20th, 1926.

---

*July 23rd, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

Kory woke up covered in cold sweat, shaking in terror, with a scream on her lips and the image of too many big, yellow eyes in her mind. Then someone hugged her, gently, and even in her panicked state, Kory recognized them as *safe*.

"It's okay, Kory," said Miss Elya softly as she hugged Kory close, rubbing her back as she whispered in her ear. "It's okay. You're safe."

Kory sobbed in the embrace, relieved beyond words that the nightmare was over. She had dreamt of the big black bad goat again, the monster who had eaten a city full of people. She'd had those dreams ever since the goat had come to the world, and she really, really wished they would stop.

"Is the young miss awake again, Elya ?" called out Grampa Gehrman from the next room.

"Yes, Professor," replied Elya. "Could you get us some warm milk, please ?"

"Of course. Evelyn ?"

"Yes, Gehrman," came a woman's voice, with a weird accent. "One moment."

Gently, Elya helped Kory out of bed, and they walked into the other room, where Elya sat Kory at a table and continued to look after her while Miss Evelyn warmed a cup of tea for the two of them.

Sitting in front of his workshop, where he was working late again despite everyone who told him he shouldn't, Grampa Gehrman was in a wheelchair, like Miss Elya used to be. Unlike Miss Elya, though, it wasn't because he was hurt and needed time to get better. Kory had asked Tanya about it, and she'd said that because Grampa Gehrman was old, he was tired, and didn't have the strength to walk anymore.

Kory had asked if that would happen to her too, and Tanya had smiled and said, maybe, maybe not. If she ate her vegetables and did her workouts, then it was less likely. So Kory had made sure to eat all her vegetables, because while Grampa Gehrman was nice, and had the nice lady Evelyn to push his wheelchair, she didn't want to not be able to walk and run when she was old.

"Here," said Miss Evelyn, putting two cups of hot milk on the table for Kory and Elya.

The two of them sipped their drinks, the warm goodness and bright lights of the room slowly pushing away the shadows of Kory's nightmare. She didn't sleep with Vreta and the others anymore, but that wasn't because she'd nightmares. Tanya had said something about the bad goat attacking her while she was away, so she needed to stay with Elya and Evelyn, who would protect her – Grampa Gehrman would help too, but he was too old, and he shouldn't fight anymore. But when Kory had told that to him, Gehrman had laughed, a sad little laugh, and told her that if it came to it, he would make sure she was safe even if he was too old to fight.

Kory didn't understand, but she felt that, somehow, not helping would break Grampa Gehrman.

She looked through the window, and into the darkness of night. There, far away, was the Very Bad Thing, the big goat which kept appearing in her dreams. Kory didn't know what it was, but she knew it was very, very bad. She had felt it appearing, just like everyone in the castle. Thankfully, Tanya had been with her when that'd happened, and she'd been able to calm Kory down.

But Tanya wasn't here anymore. She had left with most of the people in the castle to go fight the Very Bad Thing, just like she had fought the evil dragon in Vreta's home, and the bad people who had stolen Kory's old name.

Even Doctor Iosefka was gone, because a lot of people were going to get hurt and need her help to get better.

Kory didn't want people to get hurt. She had never, not in the few months of her life that she remembered, wanted anyone to get hurt.

She wished there was someone she could pray to for Tanya and everyone to come back safe.

---

*July 24th, 1926 – Western Russy Airspace*

At long last, the Imperial Army and its allies had begun to move out of Tiegenhoff and toward Moskva.

From my position in the air, protected from the wind by a mage's shield, the view was truly spectacular. Thousands and thousands of Imperial soldiers were on the march, along with every piece of motorized equipment Colonel Lergen had been able to get his hands on. Tanks, trucks, motorbikes : with the Dark Mother's influence driving most animals crazy, using horses (something even the supposedly modern Imperial Army still did) was impossible, so machine and manpower would have to do.

We were bringing enough heavy ordinance to make the Rhine Front blush : artillery was the battlefield's great equalizer, and the best way of using the conventional troops at our disposal as anything else than walking enemy rations. Given how ludicrously outnumbered our Mythos elements were going to be, even with me all but emptying Castle Schwartzstein and the Americans bringing their own toys to play, the ability to cover the land in high explosives was going to play a very important part in our battle plan.

The mere thought of the cost figures for all of this was enough to make my head spin. Simply moving this host for a single day, let alone fighting, would cost the Reich more money than the entire monthly budget of Division Y. And once the artillery shells started flying, that cost would increase even further.

The fact that Mythos research was, on the whole, so much less expensive than conventional warfare was another reason why preventing proliferation was so important. Waging a modern war was ruinously expensive : prior to the Great War, I don't think anybody in Europa had any idea just how expensive (except me, but I was cheating off my future knowledge of total war). Morality aside, that simple fact should prevent any country with sane leadership from using it to pursue its interests, since whatever you stood to gain by conquest was very unlikely to be worth the price you would need to pay.

And yes, I was aware that hadn't stopped wars in my previous world, but I was still pretty sure there had been less wars fought with artillery than with bows and arrows, even if the ones which had been fought had been much more destructive. The point was, Mythos superweapons combined the worst of the two : they were both hideously destructive, and relatively cheap. The only barrier to entry was knowledge.

I didn't know what the budget for Research Group 51 looked like, but I was pretty sure it was several orders of magnitude larger than Division Y's, given what they had managed to accomplish in so short a time, even with a genius like Teslus at the helm. Teslus himself was somewhere in the advancing force, in case we needed some last-minute maintenance (though

I also wanted him somewhere I could keep an eye on him, just in case he turned out to be a plant of Being X or another of his ilk after all).

The first phase of Operation Gottesmörder was to reach an abandoned Russy train, which our scouting parties had located and our engineer corps spent the last days working around the clock to refurbish it. While the Federation's rail network was far inferior to the Empire's, it was still our best shot to get the components of Projekt M where they needed to be. Then we would be able to advance far more quickly to Moskva, at which point we'd see if all these hours of planning with Colonel Lergen and General Hutton had been worth anything.

This, I reflected, was not the safe and peaceful posting I had been hoping for when I had been sent to Castle Schwartzstein, what felt like a lifetime ago. Yet try as I might, I couldn't think of any point where I could realistically have prevented this. It wasn't like I had known what my research paper would result in, and once Mythos magic had been discovered by Division Y, trying to sabotage it to prevent the Empire from adopting it would only have resulted in my removal from the Division, leaving the occultists to manage themselves – a thought which, even now, made me shiver with dread.

To give them their due, they *probably* wouldn't have messed things up quite as badly as the Federation had, but since there wouldn't have been anyone to stop whatever catastrophe they ended up unleashing, the end result would likely have been even worse, hard as it might be to believe while considering the devastation of Russy.

Aerial mages had managed to make contact with the remnants of the Federation Army, which was holding its ground in Josefgrad. They were keeping the city clean of the Progeny through the use of concentrated artillery fire being called any time their scouts saw so much as a hint of a monster in the distance. With their industry in as much chaos as the rest of the country, it wasn't a sustainable way to fight, but it was working for now, and keeping the Progeny from devouring tens of thousands more civilians.

On the whole, the Federation was handling the loss of Moskva exactly like I had thought it would : poorly. With how obsessed Comrade Josef had been with concentrating power in his hands to prevent anyone from betraying and usurping him, the Solstice Event had decapitated every single national organization in Russy, and the rest of the country was promptly descending into anarchy. I was bitterly certain that the only reason there wasn't half-a-dozen civil wars already was because a large chunk of the country was busy fighting off the threat of the Progeny, and because the Empire had made its intent to intervene in the region clear, so any would-be warlords were waiting to see how that panned out.

Such a waste. Such a terrible, monstrous waste.

From a purely cold-blooded, mathematical perspective, I supposed a point could be made that this disaster would thoroughly discredit the Communist ideology, thus sparing this world the atrocities it had caused in my previous one, along with all the messes the Cold War had left all over the planet. In such a costs-and-benefits analysis, the deaths of nearly the entire civilian population of Moskva and its surroundings might be considered an acceptable price : two millions lives lost to preserve those of many, many more.

To my own faint surprise, however, after spending so much time preparing Operation Gottesmörder and learning more about what Being K had done to this land, the very notion now filled me with disgust. Given my usual pragmatism, it had taken me some time to realize why : any 'greater good' argument that justified death and devastation on such a scale just *wasn't good enough*. There was a line between a necessary evil you had to live with, and an evil you just failed to stop, and this disaster was firmly in the latter category, for a number of reasons, both ethical and personal.

After all, I had been the one to lead Division Y to finding the Mythos, however unwittingly. I was the one who had brought the Kindermärchen into this world, the one who had judged the security measures of Castle Schwartzstein were good enough. And yes, the thieves had only succeeded due to the literal intervention of a god-like being, but given the nature of Division Y's work, that was no excuse.

I shook my head. In the end, it didn't matter. Nobody but me would ever know what could have been if not for the arrogance of the Federation's rulers unleashing Being K upon themselves and their people. And while I intended to argue for the people of the Federation to be treated fairly once the current crisis passed, if only to ensure none of them felt desperate enough to delve into the Mythos again, my influence on matters of international policies would be limited once the War ended.

And the War had ended, except for this last battle for the fate of the world. Even the Albish had pulled their head out of their backside and joined us, though we were keeping a wary eye on their mage contingent, just in case. If Churbull tried to restart hostilities after this, he would be dragged out of office and left hung out to dry, possibly literally.

I chuckled at the mental image of the rotund, cigar-chewing Albish Prime Minister being kicked out on the street, before a voice pulled me out of my caricature-like imaginings :

"Director ?"

"It's nothing, Zerayah," I told the Nazzadi mage. She was flying close by, along with Wüstemann : the two of them were my assigned guards for the day, until the sun set and Visha was fully operational once more. "Just thinking about things."

She accepted that non-answer without question. Truth be told, Zerayah's talent as an aerial mage was humbling. Despite how little time she had spent training, she was at least the equal of all but a few of Division Y's mages, and she didn't have Weiss' 'advantage' of an entire orichalcum prosthetic limb to channel her mana through. It wasn't just her Nazzadi heritage, either : while none of the off-world refugees who had chosen to become mages had flunked out of my training regimen, she was still head and shoulders above them. Sometimes, I wondered if she was perhaps the last descendant of some kind of magical royalty, from before the calamity which had destroyed Nazza-Duhni.

… not that such a theoretical line of royalty had done much to protect Nazza-Duhni in the end. Even now, we still didn't know where Akhar-Zegog had come from, nor what exactly had happened to the Nazzadi homeworld – and, even more worryingly, whether it could happen to our world as well. The Devourer of Hope hadn't been responsible for the planet's broken skies, I was sure of it, and Being K wasn't likely as a candidate either.

I sighed. It seemed that, even once this War was over, the peaceful retirement I longed for was still far, far away.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Somehow, when I started writing this story, I didn't think it would involve a scene where a Jeanne d'Arc expy wakes up from a nightmare of Not!Shub-Niggurath before being handed a cup of hot milk by the Doll from Bloodborne. And yet, here we are.

Gods, I love writing.

I ran the numbers for the Werwölfe after checking my notes for the entire story. Unless I made a mistake somewhere, between the successes of each Ritual of Union and the casualties taken by Division Y, there should be 38 left in Castle Schwartzstein, but I didn't put the number in the report to cover me in case I miscalculated (plus it hardly seems like the kind of intel that would be included in a file General Hutton has access to).

The response to the April's Fook Omake was overwhelmingly positive. As I posted on SpaceBattles, I'm considering writing a full-fledged story from it, but only once I have finished this one. Certainly, given how much time I'm spending playing Helldivers 2 these days, I might as well write a fanfic out of it.

But it will be a much shorter one than this one. Because of the way my brain works, I already have an idea for the ending of A Communist Cyborg's War Against Managed Democracy, and I fully intend for that fanfic to remain within a reasonable length. I mean it. Stop laughing !

Next up, Operation Gottesmörder starts in earnest. As always, I look forward to your thoughts, theories and suggestions for this chapter.

Zahariel out.

PS : also, the alerts on FFnet seem to be broken again.

# Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"The train our scouts have located was abandoned on the railway west of Moskva due to having run out of fuel. Inspecting its contents, and interviewing some of the refugees who were rescued in the area, revealed that it left the Russy capital within the hour of the Solstice Event, crammed with as many human survivors as could be gathered before they had to leave or risk being overrun by the Progeny.*

*Although Federation trains use different standards than Imperial ones, there should be no issue with repairing it. As soon as it is secured, mages will move the locomotive to the back of the convoy, while our engineering corps will clear the wagons and prepare them to house the components of Projekt M.*

*The core of Projekt M will need special care during transportation to avoid catastrophe. Any damage to the box containing it will risk exposing nearby soldiers to its effects : to minimize danger, only Untoten, Werwölfe and Puppen will be allowed within the next couple of wagons, and the Director herself will check the wards are still intact every day. If an unaugmented soldier does end up exposed to Projekt M's core, they will be immediately brought to Doctor Iosefka for treatment. This will not be up for debate, regardless of the soldier's rank, assignment, or nationality. Any soldier attempting to avoid treatment will immediately be detained and brought to the Doctor by force; should they still resist, lethal force will be employed to neutralize them.*

*The journey through the Federation will be difficult. The Progeny concentrations increase the closer to Moskva, and we can expect Being K to react to our approach by commanding them to focus on our column – but even if it does not, the simple fact that our forces will represent the largest human presence for hundreds of kilometers will draw the beasts to us."*

Extract from the final briefing notes on Operation Gottesmörder, July 22nd, 1926.

---

*"... while there is no denying the fact that Projekt M is beautiful, it is no less dangerous for it. The crystal, created through a series of complex alchemical processes, is the size of a tank, shaped like a gemstone, and blazes with an inner azure light that captivates those who look upon it.*

*Which is when the problems start. Prolonged exposure to Projekt M causes madness in approximately seventy percent of standard humans (fortunately for all of us, mages appear to be immune, though we do not know why and are unlikely to figure it out without the kind of experiments that would see the Division shut down with extreme prejudice).*

*Those afflicted suffer from nightmares, and eventually descend into violent psychosis, where they seek to unleash the full potential of Projekt M at any target. All previous loyalties and allegiances are ignored, but they retain their full intellect, knowledge and capabilities, which*

*is what led to the incident described in report M-444, which could have resulted in the total destruction of Castle Schwartzstein and, if our calculations are correct, most of the surrounding countryside.*

*Fortunately, the subverted elements were stopped before their crazed plot could come to fruition. Only one was taken alive, and while the standard purification rituals (see document H-701 for a detailed description of the methodology involved) were enough to cleanse their mind of Projekt M's influence, they succumbed to their injuries not long after, putting the total casualties of the incident at thirty-seven.*

*At the Director's orders, Projekt M will be sealed in the Black Vaults, behind numerous layers of arcane and material shielding that will prevent its influence from reaching anyone else. However, the Projekt's destructive potential, and its possible uses against the kind of threats Division Y must deal with regularly, are too important to completely shut down this avenue of research. Even the small-scale tests which were conducted before the mind-altering properties of Projekt M were discovered showed the kind of firepower which could change the face of warfare and render the very concept of fortifications completely obsolete.*

*Henceforth, the goal of the personnel assigned to Projekt M will be to figure out a method of miniaturising the crystal creation process in order to create man-portable versions of Mjölnir, which will also, hopefully, lack the deleterious effect on human minds of the greater crystal."*

Excerpt from a Division Y internal memo regarding the fate of Projekt M, [Mjölnir], February 5th, 1924.

---

*July 26th, 1926 – Western Russy, along the Moskva Line*

Günther was becoming used to hatred.

He didn't think this was a good thing, or that Gehrman would be happy to hear it, but he couldn't help himself. There were just too many things to hate in this war; too many horrors, to many deaths. The closer to the Dark Mother they got, the more traces of the Progeny's work they found. They hadn't found survivors for two days now, and the last group had been so traumatized, the mages had been forced to knock them unconscious and carry them back to Tiegenhoff – hopefully, they would recover, but Günther didn't understand the wounds of the mind well enough to tell.

When the rest of the Division had realized Günther could speak now, he had gone through a battery of tests, overseen by the Director herself. She had offered to send him back to Castle Schwartzstein to talk with Gehrman and Evelyn, but Günther had firmly refused. Oh, he wanted to speak with his maker and sister, but not if it meant leaving the front before the Dark Mother was destroyed and the people of the world safe from the Progeny.

Reading the Director's mood was difficult even for normal people, but Günther was fairly certain she had been pleased by his response, and not just because they needed every supersoldier for the push toward Moskva – although, as Günther's present situation showed, that certainly was true as well.

Lycan bodies littered the ground, torn to pieces by the Werwölfe, their tainted blood seeping into the earth. The shapeshifters were falling back now, away from the beasts' leader, before they could fall under its influence. It was up to Günther, immune as he was to the monster's eldritch pheromones, to finish the job. He'd run all the way here the moment he'd heard about the Progeny warband attacking the convoy, faster than any human could ever run, and he had made it in time.

*Not too late. Not too late to fight, not too late to help.*

*Not this time.*

*Never again.*

And there, stalking amidst the corpses of its lesser kin, was Günther's target,, the reason why the Puppe had been called in.

The Satyr looked like a hybrid between a human woman and a deer, with a pair of large antlers and short fur covering its body. But Günther knew it was neither of those things : it just looked like them as camouflage, like an insect's wings mimicking a flower's color pattern. There was no sentience behind its amethyst-coloured eyes, just a puppet of alien flesh shaped by Being K to spread its influence.

Günther had been told as much during the briefings, but it was one thing to hear the Director coldly describe the inhuman nature of the foe, and another to see it, to know it, with his own eyes. This was the first Satyr Günther had ever encountered : he didn't know whether it would have felt as vile and repugnant to him before his awakening, but he suspected even then, he'd have known something about it was completely, utterly *wrong*. It was only through its mind-altering pheromones that it could manipulate humans into doing its bidding.

As it started talking to him, Günther reminded himself of that.

"Hello, little one," it said in a purring voice that made Günther eldritch flesh crawl within his orichalcum shell. "What are you doing here ?"

"Hunting your kind," he replied.

"But why ? You have more in common with us than with these mortals," it hissed, shaping its tone into something that might be taken for disdain, if not for the sheer emptiness of its gaze revealing the lie of it. "Remember what you truly are, under this mask they force you to wear. You are one of us !"

Oh, he remembered. He remembered a ruined village, a blood-specked toy, and a promise made. A wave of anger rose from deep within him, tinting his vision red.

"I AM YOUR ENEMY !" Günther roared, and leapt toward the Satyr, swinging his blade at the Progeny's naked neck.

As a rule, Puppen didn't carry weapons. Their sculpted bodies were plenty dangerous on their own, and they still had trouble keeping their strength in check during battle, so anything they

carried into a fight was likely as not to break apart in their hands. Any enemy they faced strong enough to crack their orichalcum shell would then be faced with the shapeless thing within, which, as Günther himself had demonstrated when he'd fought an Eikon in the Parisean catacombs, was usually enough to deal with the situation at hand. And finally, the Puppen already had enough difficulties getting used to their humanoid bodies, so learning to wield weapons properly was beyond them.

Günther, however, was an exception. After the Director had been satisfied with his performance during the tests, she had handed him a glaive forged of the same material as his body : one of Gehrman's works, too heavy to be practical for a human to wield, but perfect for a Puppe's hands. A few hours of practice had been enough to confirm that whatever awakening Günther had gone through had given him better motor control along with the other, less tangible benefits. He was far from being a master with the glaive, but it was a simple enough weapon to cut through the Progeny.

The Satyr jumped back with a speed neither human nor animal could possess, dodging Günther's blow by a mere handful of centimeters. It snarled at Günther as it landed on all four, its limbs twisting in ways no human anatomy could possibly have, and lowered its head.

Günther charged on, his glaive held in front of him like the lance of a knight from the paintings he'd seen in the sections of Castle Schwartzstein that were still decorated in the old style. The Satyr didn't dodge; instead, its limbs sprung like coils, propelling it straight at the Puppe. The two beings smashed into each other with enough strength to reduce a human to pulp and a noise like a clap of thunder.

For several seconds, Günther remained immobile. Despite its seeming lean physique, the Satyr's strength was incredible, and its antlers were made of no earthly material either. The Progeny's horns had pierced through his clothes and shell, before biting into the matter beneath. There was pain, something he'd rarely known before, and never in such intensity.

But his glaive had pierced the Satyr in turn, plunging through its chest and bursting out of its back. It twitched, once, twice, as black blood poured from its wound and onto the ground. Despite what should have been an instantly lethal injury, it still lived, and Günther didn't want to wait and see whether the Satyr's regeneration could let it recover from something like that.

The Puppe let go of his weapon's handle with his left hand, and closed it around the Satyr's skull before squeezing with all of his considerable strength. Its bones were tough, and it struggled to break free of his hold, but his orichalcum grip was stronger, and soon the skull cracked. Pulped brain matter fell between his fingers, and something he identified as disgust coursed through him.

Günther pulled his glaive free of the Satyr's corpse, wiping his hand on his torn uniform before discarding it. Then, after looking over the field to make sure there weren't any enemies left, he walked back to the convoy. The soldiers flinched at the sight of the holes in his torso, and paled when they saw what was visible through them, until a Division Y mage tossed him a sheet to cover himself with.

He gave his report straight to the Director (although Colonel Lergen and the American General were also present, both of them avoiding looking at him), trying his best to imitate how he'd seen Lieutenant König and other human members of Division Y do it. She congratulated him on his work and told him to see if the technicians they'd brought could help repair the damage he'd suffered. To Günther's quiet satisfaction, there was no suggestion that he should return to Castle Schwartzstein for Gehrman to repair him – he didn't know whether he'd have obeyed such an order, but preferred not to test that.

Even if his body broke and fell apart, even if what he had been when first brought into this world was revealed to all and the sight of him only inspired terror in the hearts of his comrades, he would keep fighting, until the dead were avenged and the living were saved.

After all, he'd promised.

---

*July 27th, 1926 – Josefgrad*

The journey from Manchuria to Josefgrad had been long and gruelling. They had lost people to sickness, battle against roaming packs of monsters, and, to Zhenkov's shame, to desertion. Even the presence of the Okhotnik and the Grandmother couldn't force men who had been dragged away from their homes at gunpoint to fight for the State to continue doing so when the Federation's ongoing collapse was patently obvious.

Some wanted to go home and help defend their families, others were afraid of fighting the monsters which had brought down the Federation, and the rest were just tired of fighting. They had slipped out in the night alone or in pairs, or during patrols, entire squads simply failing to return, which forced the rest of the Army to send the Okhotnik to check whether they'd fallen victim to the monsters. It was a waste of time and effort they could ill afford, but they had little choice, as some of the missing reconnaissance squads did in fact encounter wandering packs of beasts and fail to return to the main host after being devoured alive.

The further West they had gone, the more dangerous the journey had become. Madmen, frenzied animals, inexplicably hostile vegetation : the closer they got to Moskva, the worst it all got. According to the Grandmother, this was due to the influence of the thing which had devoured the capital and turned its people into monsters. Zhenkov was fairly certain that his force had loss less men to the trip than any other unit of the Federation Army would've, but maybe that was just his pride talking.

Still, they had made it in the end. To Zhenkov's carefully concealed surprise, they had been welcomed as heroes by Josefgrad's civilian population, especially once the Okhotnik had been let loose on the monsters lurking outside the city. Zhenkov's takeover of the military units already in the city had been as smooth as could reasonably be expected, with only two executions (of Political Officers who were clearly more of a burden than a boon to morale), five arrests (of officers who had protested Zhenkov's seniority and leadership on the basis of him having effectively been exiled from Moskva) and a handful of quiet demotions (which had really been putting people back into posts where their skills and abilities could do the most good, rather than as high as their bootlicking and bribes could get them).

By Federation standards, this could hardly have gone better. Of course, the drawback of taking over a city was that you then had to manage it, which was why Zhenkov was still up at this late hour, long past the setting of the sun, reviewing reports detailing just how exactly screwed in the long term they all were. At least the office he'd requisitioned for himself was nice : it'd belonged to the head of the local Party branch, before the man in question had died in an 'accident' while trying to flee the city with, as it turned out, too much gold for his vehicle to carry.

The Okhotnik had cleared the city's surroundings of the packs of monsters that had roamed there, finally allowing the artillery crews who'd been keeping them at bay some respite. Which was really fortunate, considering that, according to the last estimates, they would have run out of shells in a week at the rate of fire needed to keep the beasts at bay, to say nothing of the state of the crews, who had been operating on nearly no sleep and the utter certitude that their work was the only thing standing between the population of Josefgrad and a horrible fate.

Technically speaking, Josefgrad had the facilities to produce more ammunition for the big guns, but even the most advanced factory Comrade Josef had been able to purchase from the West in exchange for food exports taken from the Federation's farmers couldn't function without raw materials, and the flow of those had ground to a halt after Moskva's fall. The last stockpiles had been exhausted weeks before the Manchurian Army's arrival, and there was only so much melting down every bit of metal the locals could get their hands on could do to make up for the shortfall.

As for the food situation, it was … not great. Not terrible yet : Josefgrad was one of the greatest cities of the Federation, and served as a hub for the entire region, so it had plenty of stores to feed its population and ship off to the rest of the country through the now-disabled railway. But come winter, they would need to beg for the help of other countries to prevent (another) famine. And with the Federation crumbling apart, entire regions might be left without food once the stores run out.

Despite himself, Zhenkov smiled grimly. Look at him, assuming any of them would even still be alive by winter. For all he knew, the monsters would eat them all long before their own food supplies became an issue.

"Good evening, child," came a voice behind him that was familiar by now, yet still made him nearly jump out of his skin.

Trying to force his heart to slow down through sheer force of will, he turned to see the old, iron-toothed woman grinning at him as she leant back in a wooden rocking chair he was certain hadn't been in the room before. Last he'd heard, she'd been walking the streets of the city muttering to herself in a tongue none of the soldiers he'd assigned to her 'escort duty' could recognize. He'd told his guards to let her pass if she asked to speak with him, of course – no point in risking the lives of good soldiers for no reason, especially since his own would probably be on the line as well if they behaved 'impolitely' – but he wasn't surprised she'd ignored the perimeter completely.

The more Zhenkov had interacted with the Grandmother, the more he felt like he was living in one of Russy's old stories come to life. He could only hope that this was one of the stories

where the Grandmother helped the protagonists, rather than one where they ended up in her cooking pot.

"Good evening, Grandmother," he greeted her with a bow of his head. "What can I help you with ?"

"We need to go North," she said bluntly. "That's where the fate of this land will be decided, and its children should be there when it is."

"Grandmother," Zhenkov began, calling upon all the experience he'd gained negotiating unreasonable orders with people who could kill him on a whim (or things which looked like people, though he wouldn't do the Grandmother the disservice of comparing her to some of the Political Officers he'd had to deal with, and not just because she might just be able to hear his thoughts), "we cannot fight the creature in Moskva. Surely even the Okhotnik cannot face such horror ?"

Sure, the scarified, magic-infused troopers were extraordinary warriors, but based on what his officers had managed to gather from the traumatized refugees who had managed to escape the capital, the Dark Mother which dwelled there was far too large for their weapons.

The old crone laughed, a shrill sound that made the hairs on his arms rise, and shook her head.

"Silly child," she chuckled. "Of course they cannot. They are strong, and they will grow stronger still, but they are only human."

That was reassuring, as Zhenkov hadn't been sure whether the enhanced soldiers still counted as such (although part of him couldn't help but think that what the Grandmother thought of as human might slightly differ from the rest of the world's opinion). So far, they hadn't shown any sign of further changes beyond their various enhancements, apart from needing to eat enough food to sustain their metabolisms, which, according to what little Zhenkov remembered from his science lessons, was perhaps the one thing about them that made sense.

"Dealing with the heart of darkness will be a job for someone else," the Grandmother continued. "But that doesn't mean we cannot help, hmm ?"

"Do you mean the Imperials ?" Zhenkov asked cautiously.

The defenders of Josefgrad had been in intermittent contact with the Imperial Army, using radio and the occasional aerial mage who had dropped by. Apparently, the Imperials were taking the situation very seriously.

Zhenkov felt conflicted about his motherland being subjected to the presence of foreign military forces, but he wasn't blind to the fact that they absolutely needed their help.

"Hmm, I suppose so," replied the Grandmother. "That's what most of them are calling themselves these days. But your neighbours aren't the only ones coming."

"Then the rumor of the Americans getting involved are true ?"

The crone shrugged. "How would I know ? They have friends from far away, but no doubt their homeland is called something else than what it was the last time I went there."

After several seconds of standing still, Zhenkov decided to ignore the implications of the Grandmother's words and focus on the here and now.

"If you think we can help in defeating the source of the horrors which have befallen Russy, Grandmother, then of course we will go."

The Federation's capital city was around a thousand kilometers to the north-west – not a distance easily crossed under the best of circumstances, and those were anything but. But they would have to make the trip regardless. Not only did honor, duty, and any hope of being able to look at himself in the mirror hung in the balance, he had a feeling telling the Grandmother no would be a very, very bad idea, though probably not one he would regret very long.

The Grandmother smiled again, sending yet another shiver down his spine.

"Such a good, obedient boy you are," she said. "I couldn't have asked for a better grandchild."

---

*"Scouting reports have revealed that the ground around Moskva is twisting due to the presence of Being K, in ways similar to earthquakes. The railway line will become unusable within the city's vicinity : given the still-evolving conditions of the area, we cannot predict where exactly. The train will advance as far as possible, and once it can go no further, Projekt M will be carried to the intended firing site using trucks and old-fashioned magical muscle.*

*As Division Y's technicians and occultists work to setup Projekt M, the rest of the army will establish a defensive perimeter around the area, to keep all Progeny from interfering with the work. We have selected the most defensive position that also gives us the best shot at hitting Being K with Projekt M, and the troops have been briefed on what they'll need to do once we arrive – that is to say, make every second count in preparing the ground for the Progeny attack.*

*There is a small chance that Being K will not react to our advance, and allow us to bring Projekt M to bear, so long as we do not approach the city proper. However, due to its suspected achronal nature, that possibility is extremely remote, and should not be relied upon."*

---

*August 4th, 1926 – Moskva, the Lair of the Dark Mother*

*It can feel them. Tens of thousands of slave-sparks are drawing near, with the cold flame blazing at their head. It knows their intent, for they have fought its agents every step of the way.*

*But it does not matter. There is nothing they can do to prevent it from fulfilling its purpose. It has watched them through the eyes of its agents, learned their capabilities and limitations,*

*and found them lacking.*

*Then, suddenly, something which was hidden from its senses suddenly becomes visible. To its senses, it is a blazing beacon, something it recognizes as a fragment of a weapon from a time long gone, recovered from the refuse pile of antiquity and repurposed by the slave-sparks. Now that it can perceive it, it can see back to how it came so close to its demesne, hidden away behind wards its senses could not penetrate.*

*This ? This can hurt it. This can destroy it. The slave-sparks do not know what it is they found, what it is they now bring to bear against it. Even broken, even with only a fraction of its potential available to the slave-sparks, the weapon is capable of ending it – a true, final End.*

*Still, it does not feel fear. It merely reconsiders its course of action. Its conclusion that the slave-sparks were no threat to it was based on false premises. It did not make a mistake, because to make a mistake implies to make a wrong choice, and it does not possess the free will required for such a thing. It simply acted on the information available to it, which was in error due to the limitations of its perceptions. Now, with new information, comes a new, inevitable conclusion :*

*The weapon the slave-sparks have cobbled together must be destroyed. The threat to its purpose must be removed. And it has the tools to ensure that this comes to pass, so that it can continue its work unopposed.*

*It opens its many mouths, and commands its agents to action.*

---

*August 4th, 1926 – Outskirts of Moskva*

"Well, so much for our hope that they wouldn't react to our presence until it was too late," muttered Colonel Lergen.

One of Degurechaff's mages was projecting a map-sized illusion of the field, sent to his computation orb by another mage flying in the air above them. Such a real-time view of the battlefield was the kind of intel military commanders throughout History would have sold their firstborn to get, yet Lergen barely thought of it, more preoccupied with what the image was showing.

"Good Lord, that's a lot of the bastards," grunted General Hutton, summing up Lergen's own feelings perfectly.

The Progeny was coming out of Moskva and straight toward the Allied forces, responding to that hideous sound the Dark Mother had started making minutes ago – and which still hadn't stopped, God help them all. There had already been reports of men going into hysterics, jamming anything they could get their hands on into their ears to silence the horrible noise (which resembled the braying of a thousand goats in the same way the Werwölfe resembled the wolf-men of lore) the Entity was making.

Given that every soldier in the Imperial Army carried a combat knife, that had resulted in grave injuries and even death on a few occasions, but they couldn't do anything about it. Not when a horde of Lycans, Satyrs, and other horrors was marching out of the ruins of the Federation's capital.

No, 'marching' wasn't the right word, Lergen decided. They were pouring out of the ruined city like a black tide of madness and twisted flesh. There was no discipline, no order that Lergen could see – wait. No. He could see it now.

"They aren't running into and crushing each other," he said aloud. "If it were humans down here, there would definitely be bodies left after such a stampede."

"Indeed," Degurechaff nodded. "But this close to Being K's avatar, that's not surprising."

"You think it is directing their movements ?" asked Hutton, aghast. "Controlling them like, what, puppets ?"

"Not exactly," the Major said, hesitating in the manner of someone trying to come up with a way to explain their audience would understand. "The Progeny haven't shown any sign of a hive-mind before, but there has to be a reason why so many types of creatures were able to work together instead of attacking each other, given their unnatural aggression."

Lergen decided not to ask what Degurechaff meant by 'hive-mind'. He had learned long ago that the Major's brain was home to many concepts the rest of the world hadn't yet learned about, and he already had enough nightmares without going looking for more.

"That implies some kind of control mechanism," she continued. "Given what our researchers found when dissecting Satyr corpses, it is probably pheromones-based, in which case proximity to Being K would increase their effectiveness. Of course," she shrugged, "this is all speculation. It's not like the Progeny regard the laws of biology and evolution as anything more than guidelines."

"Still," she shrugged, "this is good news, in a way."

"Really ? Now this I've got to hear," said Hutton, eyebrows raised. "How can this mess be any kind of good news ?"

"It's simple," replied the Major. "Despite all our calculations and occult research into the nature of our foe, we still weren't sure that Projekt M could actually hurt it. But the fact that it's responding to our presence – and that it started screaming and the Progeny started to move at the exact moment we removed the Projekt's core from its containment – indicates that it is a threat to it. Otherwise, why would it bother attacking us ?"

There was a moment of silence, then, despite himself, Lergen chuckled.

"I suppose you are right, Major," he said. "That is a silver lining on a very large, very dark cloud."

*"Soldiers of the Allied Forces, hear me. I am Colonel Eric von Lergen of the Imperial Army.*

*In moments, the hordes of the enemy will reach our lines. Then, you will need to fight the hardest battle of our time. Many of you may die, and you deserve to know why.*

*In all of our species' bloody history, never has there been a battle more righteous, a cause more just than the one we fight for today. Our divisions, our disputes and grudges, are meaningless in the face of this evil. Millions of people are already dead, and yet, all the horror that has already befallen this land pales compared to what will come if we fail here today.*

*Today, matters such as country, race, or religion, are utterly irrelevant. Today is about the survival of the human race against something utterly inimical to it.*

*This is the final battle of the Great War. It will either go down in History, or there will be no History to record at all.*

*All of Division Y's strength has been assembled today. Furthermore, the might of the Unified States' own superweapons stands with us. Even the Allied Kingdom has recognized the threat we face, and sent us their mages to help in any way they can.*

*Yet still, our supersoldiers and mages are few compared to the horde arrayed before us. And so the duty falls to you, once again.*

*At all costs, you must hold the line. It is the first and oldest duties of the soldier, and today, the fate of all Humanity depends on your ability to fulfill it. Hold the line, long enough for our last Wunderwaffe to fire, and strike down the heart of the evil before us.*

*And it will strike it down I promise you. Time and time again, the Wunderwaffen have delivered miracles, and made the impossible a reality. And today will be no different ! Today, we shall all become godslayers !*

*For the Empire ! For Europa ! For Humanity !"*

*"That was a fine speech, Colonel. A shame that, based on everything we've observed so far, the Progeny do not appear to feel fear."*

*"Not yet, Major. Not. Yet. ... wait. Is this thing still on ?!"*

Radio message broadcast across the Allied Forces, August 4th, 1926.

---

*Cut content : Tanya's speech to Imperial soldiers arriving to Tiegenhoff before the convoy's departure.*

"Welcome to the Federation, gentlemen !

I will not lie, the chances of your survival are small.

Some may even turn against your friends as bestial horrors.

But you have my word that I will use every arcane weapon and tool at my disposal to ensure that this grotesque garden before us is cleansed in fire.

This is the greatest reward, more than mere glory, for the sake of Humanity must be placed above all other concerns.

Now come ! Strike down the bestial scourge that rises against us.

Help us bring down the Hammer we stole from the Gods.

I ask, not for my own selfish advancement, but for the good of the Empire !"

Chapter End Notes

AN : This took a while, because this chapter really fought me for some reason. Hopefully it was still enjoyable.

Next chapter, the big battle between the Alliance and the Progeny will begin. But, the thing is, I am no military strategist. There is a reason this story has been about Division Y pulling miracles using eldritch superweapons (apart from me finding it cool) : it is a lot easier to write without breaking the suspension of disbelief. I have the story beats of the battle planned out, but not the gritty details.

So, in the interest of the Allied Forces not appearing incompetent, I am once again asking for your suggestions. If you were in the command center when Lergen, Hutton and Tanya planned this, how would you have set the defense of the hill atop which Projekt M is being prepared, and why ?

I look forward to your suggestions.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

***August 4th, 1926 – Moskva Outskirts***

Uger is flying above the battlefield. His many-faceted eyes see far more than human eyes would in his place, even with the assistance of optic spells or mundane binoculars.

His thermal vision is all but useless. Being K's enormous body is like a furnace, giving off so much heat it's affecting the wind currents, which his hyper-sensitive wings picked up on immediately. Trying to use his echolocation at this range would only return the vaguest of information at the best of time, but when he tried, all he got was nonsensical readings, which the occultists believe is due to the Class Ten entity distorting space around its incarnation in ways that aren't immediately obvious.

His ordinary senses show him an equally grandiose sight. The engineering corps have been hard at work since their arrival, requisitioning thousands of soldiers to build fortifications as fast as possible. Kilometers of barbed wire have been placed, using aerial mages to deploy them quickly. Through the use of spell formulas learned from the Nazzadi refugees, the wire has been made stronger than it should be, capable of harming even the toughened flesh of Being K's monsters. The earth has been seeded with thousands of mines, placed in densities far above any ever used on the Western Front.

Rows of Frisian horses have been laid down near the bottom of the incline, their metal magically reinforced as well. Behind them stand the non-flying supersoldiers of the Allied Forces, to deal with the Progeny that make it through the killing ground. Werwölfe, Puppen, and American soldiers in power armor all stand side by side – but the line is long, and even together, there are only so many of them.. The Hünen and the Titan are standing further up the slope, behind the first line where hundreds of machine guns, flamethrowers and M-912s lie ready within hastily-constructed defensive positions.

Without a significant artillery contingent of its own, Uger is confident there is no human army in the world who could break this perimeter. But, as his gaze turns northward, he is reminded that it is no human enemy they face, but the Progeny of Being K.

There are so many of them. It is not an army, nor a horde or a legion. It is a tide, a solid mass of flesh pouring over the landscape that could drown the entire world – and that will, if they don't stop it here. The sight of it, combined with the ceaseless bleating of the Dark Mother, which hasn't stopped since it began and the Progeny began to move out of the corpse of Moskva, is enough to fill him with dread. Even the skies aren't safe, full as they are of the Locust swarms – which, mercifully, have yet to leave the dead capital.

There is no way the Allied Forces can hold forever against such a host, let alone defeat it. The Kinder are still immobile, but the Lycans and Satyrs alone outnumber them by a margin that is impossible to calculate. And while scouting the fallen capital was impossible, the

commanders are assuming Being K has been creating some new, never seen before abominations within the ruins. They cannot kill them all : they do not have the numbers, or the ammunition.

But that's not the point, Uger reminds himself. The Allied Forces' objective isn't to kill all the Progeny, because that would still leave Being K in play, and it is the real threat to the entire world. No, their mission is to hold the Progeny back long enough for the arcano-engineers of Division Y, working alongside a handful of American experts who've been cleared to assist, to finish setting up Projekt M and fire the Wunderwaffe at the Class Ten Mythos entity.

Having seen what the M-912s can do, Uger has no doubt the immense eldritch cannon can destroy pretty much anything it is aimed at, and hopefully Being K is no exception. If it is … no. He mustn't think about it. Defeatism is a poison, which can causes a battle to be lost before it has even begun.

To banish his fear and his doubts, Uger thinks back to what he saw during the march to Moskva, when he went scouting ahead of the main force. He remembers broken doors and claw marks on the walls of family homes. He remembers small bones, gnawed and broken by bestial jaws to get at the marrow within, left behind in empty villages.

Slowly, fear recedes. It doesn't disappear completely, because that would be a madness all its own, but it is pushed back by cold rage.

He knows the fear is only partially natural. Simply by existing, Being K is slowly driving everyone close to it insane, its presence warping the very laws of reality on which all biology is built. To those without the advantages of his dual nature, the effect is even worse : thanks to his supernatural senses, Uger can hear the dismayed screams of the soldiers below as they, too, behold the true scope of the foe they are to face this day.

But, just like Uger won't let fear overwhelm him, so too do the soldiers hold their ground. Uger can hear the radio transmissions of the Allied Forces, a hundred exchanges at once as the final checks are made. Beyond that, if he pushes his senses just a little, he can hear the soldiers whisper to themselves and one another, repeating prayers and promises, doing everything they can to steel their resolves. Colonel Lergen's words are echoed a thousand times and more, stiffening the spines of the troops in the face of the Progeny's horror.

The Whisper watches as the horde advances across the landscape. When their vanguard crosses the line marked by the scouts which indicates the extreme range of the Allied Forces' artillery, he emits a shriek in a certain frequency – a signal to the forces below, which is echoed by the other watchers, for now more than ever, redundancy is crucial.

At once, the artillery of the Eastern Imperial Army, reinforced by every piece which could be dragged to the new (and hopefully final) front of the Great War in time opens fire. Hundreds of shells rise through the air, and Uger and the other fliers watch as their parabolic arcs start their descent, accelerating faster and faster until – impact.

The ground quakes, the air vibrates, and tons of earth and gore are sent flying. As far as Uger knows, it is the largest artillery barrage in the history of Mankind, and despite all the eldritch wonders and horrors he has witnessed, despite the half-remembered images of infinity from

the Rite of Union that still haunt his dreams, the spectacle still gives him pause, perhaps precisely because of its mundane origins. This devastation was made without any input from the Denkmaschine, without any whisper from the Beyond to guide the hand of the scientists who designed its funding principles and the engineers who perfected their craft over a hundred iterations.

The world trembles under the fury of man-made iron gods, unleashing their fiery wrath upon the horrors that pour from Moskva in an unending tide. Uger remembers the projections made in the command room as the final details of Operation Gottesmörder were finalized : even without the lingering influence of the Dark Mother, the region will be uninhabitable for years to come from unexploded ordinance and amount of metal left in the soil alone.

With that first volley, hundreds, thousands of Progeny are obliterated. The healing factor which makes them such a nightmare to fight with conventional weaponry is woefully insufficient to pull them together from such explosive firepower, and they lack the sheer toughness of the most resilient Werwölfe which let them cross the Rhine's no-man's-land and reach the Francois trenches (though not even that particular hellscape has ever suffered such concentrated violence).

Any human army would be given pause by such hideous slaughter. Most would rout outright, any officer trying to force them to go on swiftly shot by their own men, no matter the threats and level of propaganda they'd been subjected to. Uger has never seen it himself, but he heard about such things happening during his time on the Western Front, in both the Francois and Imperial armies.

But the Progeny doesn't even slow down. They keep charging right into the area of saturated bombardment, which the best artillerists in the Reich have carefully calculated to be as close to constant as possible. The infernal bleating of Being K should be drowned out by the cacophony, and in a way it is, but Uger can still hear it, just like everyone else. He suspects that those who live past this day will hear it for the rest of their lives, just like what happened to so many of the Dacian survivors.

This goes on for several minutes, without a single beast making it through the deathly rain of iron and fire. But, inevitably, the barrage falters. Barrels overheat, parts break down; despite all the advances and wonders of Imperial engineering, entropy takes its toll on the iron gods. Of course, this has been planned for, and the artillery shifts to the second bombardment pattern. Now, the goal is to inflict maximum casualties on the Progeny, not stop them from advancing.

More beasts die, and more come, running through the rain of death with as much care for their lives as an Imperial General might feel for a single bullet. Eventually, the first Lycans make it through and reach the minefield, which have been laid down in concentrations never seen before (and which would probably violate several clauses of the Treaty of Worms if used against humans). There are more explosions, and then, moments later, the machine gun emplacements open fire, adding new notes to the symphony of destruction that is Mankind's response to the horrors Being K has unleashed.

Unlike some of the Werwolf sub-types, the Whispers cannot smile. But if Uger could at the moment, he definitely would – and it wouldn't be a pretty sight. The joy he feels may be

grim, but it is joy all the same.

*This is our world*, he thinks, as strongly as he can, just in case the entity which destroyed the Russy Federation can hear him – which, for all he knows, it can. *Not yours.*

Then he plunges down onto the battlefield, ready to add his firepower to the slaughter. It won't be much, in the grand scheme of things, but every bit adds up.

That, perhaps, he reflects before turning himself into a living drill to take out a Satyr which is getting worryingly close to the firing line, is how Mankind will triumph over gods.

---

Once, the beast had a name.

Then he (and *it* was a *he* then) ate the food that was freely offered by the Party to all citizens in Moskva. He was suspicious, of course, but figured this was just another propaganda coup. The food must have been taken from elsewhere in the Federation which had probably needed it just as much as the folks in the capital did, but there was nothing he could do about it. In any case, the distribution was certain to cease soon, so best make the most of it while it lasted.

Out of everyone in his habitation, he ate the most of the free food, due to his size and how hard he worked in the factories. That didn't matter at the time : there was plenty for everyone, for the first time in longer than he could remember.

And so, when the Dark Mother came, he was the first inside his small apartment to change, to succumb to her call and transform – the first to be destroyed, the first to die, the first to be remade, and then the first to kill.

Yes, once, the beast had a name. Once, it had loved ones (his wife and two children), hopes (to not draw the attention of the Commissars) and dreams (to get a good enough job in the capital that he and his family wouldn't have to go hungry some days, maybe something directly in the Party, which would have granted them some small measure of protection from the Commissariat).

Now, it has none of these things, and cannot remember ever having them. It is simply part of the horde, and the hunger it once feared consumes its every moment, never satiated, no matter how much it feeds on the unearthly flesh that grows within the ruins of the city. It exists to eat and it eats to exist; a vicious Ouroboros sustained by the eldritch power of the Dark Mother.

The feasting has stopped, but the beast doesn't miss it. The beast has no notion of time, of past or future : to it, there is only the now. It smells steel and gunpowder, and the soft flesh of prey underneath, carried through the air by a wind whose coldness it doesn't feel anymore. Saliva flows between its jaws, burning into the bare earth beneath its paws. Fresh meat. New meat.

It does not hear a voice, does not receive orders from the entity which turned him into it when it entered the world and murdered his city. Its ears pick up the bleating of Being K, and

it moves in accord to its will, because it can do naught else, like a white cell in a human body moving to fight an infection – or, more aptly, a single cancerous cell devouring and multiplying without regard for the damage it is doing to its host. In every way that matters, it is part of the Dark Mother now, and it is the sole mercy of its condition that nothing remains of who it was to realize what has become of him.

It is one in the horde which leaves the city-made-lair, one more Lycan in a sea of tens of thousands that pours out of streets overgrown with twisted life. Fire rains from the sky, and its kin die by the hundreds around it, but the beast doesn't care. There is only the hunger, only the compulsion to move forward, toward the fresh, living prey.

It passes through the deluge of death, the host of its kindred thinned but still numerous. The ground explodes, and the air fills with projectiles which tear into the horde. Still, the beast charges. It can see the prey now, cowering atop a hill, behind false thorns and piles of dirt. The hunger grows even stronger at the sight – not stronger than it thought possible, because it does not think, but stronger all the same.

The false thorns bite through the flesh of the beasts in front of it, ripping off their limbs and sending them stumbling to the ground, howling in thwarted hunger, before more flying metal kills them. The beast keeps moving, climbing atop its fallen kin to pass the metal thorns. One of them digs into its left front limb, ripping a gash into its fur, skin and muscle, but it ignores the pain and keeps moving, and soon the wound disappears, the flesh knitting itself together – which causes its hunger to spike again.

There should be a limit to how hungry a living thing can be and still live. But with the alien will of the Dark Mother pushing it forward, the beast is beyond such limitations. It accelerates, its physiology releasing new hormones into its bloodstream to push it beyond its limits, causing muscle to tear and bone to fissure. With this much momentum, it will be able to leap over the metal obstacles left in its way and reach the prey, to rip and tear and feast on their soft flesh. Its legs contract –

A ghostly figure bursts out of the ground and plunges its claw into the beast's chest. It feels cold, briefly, the shock of it violent enough to completely block out the pain of its new injury. Then the Spectre-type Werwolf tears out its heart in a geyser of rapidly-cooling blood and viscera before throwing the pulsating organ away.

It takes several seconds for the beast's brain to realize it is dead. Its jaws are still biting pointlessly, trying and failing to satisfy a hunger it still feels, even in its state.

Meanwhile, the Spectre has already moved on by the time the last of the beast's unnatural life finally fades. On this battlefield, less than ten minutes since the start of Operation Gottesmörder, its demise goes unremarked and unmourned. And, with the records of Moskva destroyed during the Solstice Event, no one will ever know the name of the man it once was.

---

Within ten minutes of the battle starting, Andrew realizes that his hearing probably won't ever recover from this without some serious magical healing. Which wouldn't be so bad, his commission from this job can probably cover the fee if he makes it out alive, but he has a

feeling no amount of magical healing will help with getting the damnable *bleating* out of his head.

That's a problem for the future, though, and right now, Andrew finds it very hard to believe that there is any future waiting for him. As a foreign observer who isn't part of any of the Allied Forces, the journalist has been relegated to standing on the fortified hills, close to the artillery. He has to stay well clear of the immense Wunderwaffe they've brought all the way from the Empire on what passes for the Federation's railway system : not only doesn't he have clearance to know about it, but from what he's heard, mere proximity to it is dangerous as hell, even when it hasn't been turned on yet.

There is a voice in Andrew's head (well, several, but he's pretty sure this one is his and not one of the ones they were instructed not to listen to at the briefing) telling him he should be down in the trenches below, with a rifle in hands, to die side by side with the soldiers there if need be.

It would be the honorable thing to do, he supposes, but while he has spent time in the trenches of the Rhine and seen more than his fair share of warfare (figuratively speaking, of course, as there is no such thing as 'fair' in war, and he's firmly convinced that the only acceptable share of warfare is none), he isn't a trained soldier. He would only get in the way of the troops, and do more harm than good.

And so Andrew watches, taking pictures with his camera and writing down everything he sees in a thick notebook, trying very hard to force his hands not to shake so much that it makes it all useless. It is all he can do, but it is important. If there is a future beyond the hideous, teeming nightmare the Dark Mother intends to create (and the voice which tells him there won't be is definitely one he mustn't listen to, regardless of where it comes from), the world must remember what happens here today.

He still doesn't know for certain how the Solstice Event came to pass, but he is a journalist, and a damn good one if he says so himself. He knows when to talk, when to ask questions, and when to shut up and listen. With these skills, and the fact the Reich isn't so much trying to hide what happened as still figuring out the details themselves, Andrew has managed to piece together a vague picture of what led to this whole mess. The Federation's leadership was worried about the Wunderwaffen (understandable), and figured out that the best way to counter them was to get their own magical superweapons (also understandable, given the Empire's militaristic reputation).

Unfortunately for the Federation's leaders, they had killed or imprisoned all their mages during their bloody revolution, and their remaining scientists were too scared of being executed for making 'anti-revolutionary' discoveries. So they had decided they should steal Division Y's homework instead of doing their own research like the Americans, or going into a foreign country and steal priceless cultural relics to use as magical weapons instead like the esteemed worthies of the Allied Kingdom.

Somehow, their spies managed to steal something from Division Y, and then whoever the Federation's higher-ups put in charge promptly fucked up and brought forth the apocalypse, in a way that makes Albion's mishap in Kemet look like a school's science experiment gone wrong.

Which is why it's important that this is all recorded. The world needs to know what happens when you mess around with Elder (or, as some of the Imperial occultists called, Mythos) Magic without whatever precautions it is Division Y uses to avoid blowing up the Empire. People must realize how dangerous this stuff is, to avoid another Solstice Event.

So Andrew brings up his binoculars, fights off the urge to vomit at the images it shows him, and keeps writing – so that this particular section of History doesn't end up repeating. And maybe, just maybe, there is some defiance in the fact that he assumes there will be a History to remember.

---

Hans is afraid. He isn't ashamed of it : he doesn't think anyone in the entire Allied Forces isn't afraid right now, except maybe for the supersoldiers of Division Y and Colonel Lergen.

But Hans isn't one of the shape-shifting champions of the Reich who stand on the frontline against the Progeny, ready to match their bestial ferocity with their own. Nor he is a hero of the Reich like Colonel Lergen, the man who broke the Fiends of Kemet's advance and conquered Ildoa faster than any warlord in history. He is just one more soldier of the Imperial Eastern Army, just an ordinary Imperial Citizen who was doing his military service when the Great War erupted, and who didn't see any action even as the rest of the Imperial Army fought for the Reich elsewhere.

Before the start of Operation Gottesmörder, he was stupid enough to be jealous of the Northern and Western Armies for getting all the glory (not the Southern Army, obviously), and complain about it with his comrades at the mess hall. He wasn't the only one, of course : complaining about stuff like this was a common past-time in the Eastern Army, which spent its time in a staring contest with the Federation, keeping the enormous country in check.

Now he knows better. If this is what war is, then he would have been perfectly happy with spending his entire service metaphorically standing guard on the Empire's walls to keep the Eastern barbarians at bay. Of course, he knows that's not the case : this battle is unlike any other of the Great War, of any war ever fought by men on this world.

But he'd still much rather be bored in the barracks than here, with the thunder of a thousand guns barely drowning out the hideous howls of the Progeny (and completely failing to cover the bleating of the greater horror).

The only thing distinguishing Hans from his brothers-in-arm is that, thanks to the large build he's inherited from his father, he's qualified to operate one of the new machine guns. Which is why he is aiming the heavy weapon at the horde of Progeny, fingers pulling the trigger. Per the brass' instructions, there isn't any ammunition conservation : he and every other gunner fires at will into the mass, pausing only when the ammo belt needs to be changed, at which point he has to pry his fingers loose from the trigger.

There is little aiming involved in the affair : the horde is so compact it would be hard to miss, but Hans is big and strong enough to take the gun's recoil and keep it trained on the enemy as he fires, alongside dozens of other machine guns on this section of the defenses alone.

If they were once men, like the wizards of Division Y say, then there is nothing left of their former selves visible in their behavior. They charge straight at the line, jumping over the corpses of their dead without even slowing down. It feels like shooting at the tide, rather than an enemy army.

Part of Hans (a very small part, compared to the rest of him which is busy keeping the machine gun aimed and trying not to scream in terror) is obscurely grateful. Before today, he didn't really understand the kind of damage a machine gun can do to flesh, and the thought that, if he weren't shooting at the Progeny, he would be firing at other human beings, people like him whose only difference was being born elsewhere, sickens him. Maybe that means he isn't a good soldier.

He doesn't really care, which is somewhat surprising.

Time ceases to have meaning to Hans. He aims, fires, waits for the click that indicates the gun has run out. There is a brief pause, then one of his companions slaps him on the arm (his hearing is too shot to pick out one specific shout in this cacophony) to indicate that he can shoot again.

Then, suddenly, the gun stops firing way ahead of schedule. Hans blinks, and looks down at the weapon, puzzled. His mind is fogged by the sheer horror of his situation, but he still realizes that the gun has jammed. This can be repaired : already the rest of his squad are working on it. But he knows from long hours of training that it will take time – for what that particular breakage looks like, a couple of minutes, Hans would say.

And, as he looks back up at the horde, he knows that's time they don't have. With the gun inoperable, the squad cannot cover their section of the line. Sure, each heavy weapon emplacement's field of fire overlaps with several others, but it still means a decrease in the firepower of this particular section of the line.

The Progeny lack the tactical sense to realize this, or so Hans dearly hopes. But simple weight of number means that more and more start passing through the area of lessened danger, and they are coming straight for Hans' position. The other soldiers realize what's going on immediately and try to redirect as much of their fire as they can to compensate, but it isn't enough. It cannot be enough, not against the horde.

Hans is going to die, he realizes. So are his squad mates. They are all going to die, and their death will make the hole in their defensive line permanent, which will put the rest of the soldiers in danger. This might be the opening which the horde needs to break the spine of the Allied Forces.

It seems wrong, that such a little thing as their machine gun breaking down could result in so great a catastrophe.

Hans wants to turn and run, to abandon his post and try to save his skin. But he knows all that will achieve is make him die tired and a coward. There are just too many monsters, and they are too fast. So he takes a deep breath and reaches for his pistol. He isn't sure whether he intends to shoot the beasts or himself, but either is better than simply standing here frozen –

A shadow passes over him, and he hears the beating of great wings. From the skies, a figure in black armor descends, a spear of gleaming silver in hand, carried on wings of moonlight. Hans recognizes it : it's one of the Eikons which turned against their makers at Bovariastadt, when whatever caused the city to be quarantined happened. Right now, though, Hans doesn't care about that : all he cares about is that he might just survive after all.

The winged warrior plunges into the approaching Progeny like the wrath of the Lord, and Hans shouts at his comrades to hurry up and fix the damn gun.

---

*"Lunarch Nala, deploy to section 19-B."*

The Lunarch hears the General's words, sent through a communication spell by one of the aerial mages helping overseeing the battle. She and the other former Eikons are held in reserve, waiting to plug in the holes in the Allied Forces' lines. In the time since the battle started, most of her brethren have already been deployed, and now it is her turn.

She flies with all the speed she is capable of, only slowing down at the very last instant to avoid injuring the Imperial soldiers with the shockwave. It is a very tight maneuver : one mistake and she would crash down with enough speed to turn half her body to pulp, even with her enhancements, and she doubts she'd have the time to regenerate from that before the Progeny tore her to shreds.

But her training at Castle Schwartzstein was extensive, and she manages it perfectly, coming down atop a group of Lycans who are obliterated by the flash of energy she lets loose as she lands. Those at the edge of the affected area are sent flying, but they don't pause, don't hesitate : instead, they immediately start converging on Nala, rushing at her without fear.

Good. The more focused on her they are, the less chances of them slipping by and breaking through. Nala raises her spear, and begins to fight in earnest.

It is the first time she truly, completely lets loose. As an Eikon, she only faced the Imperial Southern Army, already broken by the awesome power of the Trinity's Tear, and she was freed from her shackles before having to actually engage Division Y's fliers at the Battle of Bovariastadt. And while her training under Director Degurechaff was closer to the real thing than anyone else would dare, there is still a very clear difference.

For one thing, she doesn't expect to survive this, and she's at peace with that fact.

Nala is an angel with black armor and moonlight wings as she battles the spawn of Being K. Her spear cuts through Progeny flesh, and between its sharpness and her strength, it barely slows down with each strike. She pivots on her left foot, dodging a Lycan leaping at her and smashing her left elbow into its head with enough force to cave in its bestial skull, before beheading another with her spear.

She draws upon the wellspring of power within her. Before her transformation in the Holy See, she already had enough mana to be an aerial mage (if the Francois allowed their colonial subjects such opportunities, which they most definitely didn't before their defeat on the

Rhine). Becoming an Eikon increased her reserves considerably, and breaking free of Being X's control hasn't weakened her in any way.

Bolts of energy burst from the tip of her spear to incinerate whole packs of beasts at a time. Arcs of raw mana jump across her armor before earthing themselves into the ground, burning holes into the carpet of dead Progeny that swiftly surrounds her, and crunches under her boots.

She is strong, unstoppable. She is wrath made manifest. Far above, she senses the Director's presence, the Lady of Stars watching the battle unfold in her human form, waiting for the correct time to join the fray herself. Nala fights harder, knowing that she is watching, remembering sermons from meetings of the Path of Stars in Castle Schwartzstein.

The Lady will lead and help them, but she will not save them. She cannot. She is powerful, but not almighty – and that is well, for salvation unearned is no salvation at all. Only together can they deliver the world from the evil the Federation has unleashed.

This is Nala's purpose, she knows deep within her heart. This is her atonement for the lives she took under the control of the Congregation of Michael, the price she willingly pays for the innocent minds she tainted with Being X's indoctrination.

More beasts come, howling and snarling as they climb over the dismembered corpses of their brethren without hesitation to hurl themselves at her. She meets their charge head-on, blazing with silver light. A Satyr's claws reach her left forearm before she cuts the creature in two – the first injury she's sustained since joining the fight.

It is not the last. A Lycan's teeth bite at her ankle, before she breaks its skull with the haft of her spear – but the jaws remain closed in death. She fights through the pain, but cannot avoid the slight decrease in her speed this causes. Nine beasts jump on her at once, and while she obliterates the first eight with a blast of moonlit fire, the last one rams her with enough strength to briefly make her lose her balance. She rips it off herself and throw it at another group, but cannot block several claw strikes at her back, one of which, performed by a Satyr with goat features, damages the connection between her armor and her right wing, causing the appendage to flicker and twist madly.

Now this hurts, truly and deeply. Nala actually stumbles, her vision blacking out for the briefest of moments before she shakes herself and turn to cut her attacker from throat to groin. But she can feel the disruption in her mana, and can no longer use her magic to reinforce herself as easily.

She keeps fighting regardless. With a wordless shout, she lets loose a pulse of energy to push back the beasts which have taken advantage of her blackout, despite the spike of pain this sends throughout her body.

In total, it takes seven minutes and forty-three seconds for Nala to die, and she takes four hundred and sixty-eight Lycans and nine Satyrs down with her. Her last stand buys enough time for Hans's squad to repair their machine gun, and for reinforcements to arrive from the reserves, bolstering the line and preventing the collapse of this section of the front.

She dies happy.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Hello, everyone ! I am back !

Sorry about the long wait, but I'm sure you can see why it took me a while to shift from Darth Cain to this. The tone difference is quite jarring, after all. Also, this is the largest battle of the story so far, and keeping tracks of everything to create a proper outline is quite the task.

The first draft of this chapter was longer, but I ended up cutting it apart for pacing reasons (meaning there's already 5k words already written for what comes next). Writing this entirely in the present tense was a bit of a chore, given how used I am to writing the narration in past tense, but I think it was worth it. The entire battle will be like this, for reasons I'm sure you can figure out on your own, and should take around four or five chapters, depending on the Muse's whims. In any case, there will be many more POVs before this ends, one way or another.

Many thanks to everyone who helped me come up with the Allied Forces' defenses by suggesting stuff like barbed wire and landmines. My primary goal was to avoid making Lergen and co. look like whoever was in charge of Winterfell's defenses in GoT, and I think I managed it while remaining vague enough at the same time.

As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this first part of Operation Gottesmörder. I look forward to your thoughts, comments, and theories as to how this will all play out.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

***August 4th, 1926 – Moskva, the Lair of the Dark Mother***

*It watches through a hundred thousand eyes; it listens through a hundred thousand ears; it acts through a million limbs; it thinks with a single biological mass that has as much in common with the slave-sparks' brains as they have with the neural systems of individual ants.*

*The situation is not progressing as it planned. Despite the numerous agents it has sent to destroy the weapon of the slave-sparks, the device is still untouched, still a threat to it. It still has a host of agents left, but many have been disabled, and while it can recycle their components, the process will take time.*

*It does not feel frustration, because it is as capable of feeling anything as the smallest piece of rock resting on a mountainside. But the persistence of the slave-sparks does trigger its escalation protocols, and so it begins to consider new courses of action.*

*It could move its primary terminal to intervene directly. Prior observation has shown that the slave-sparks cannot withstand close proximity to it. But unlike the ones it subverted in order to manifest, these slave-sparks have demonstrated that they possess some defences against its influence. And moving might cause the other bright presence it can sense floating in the sky to take action. More importantly, its primary terminal cannot move as fast as its agents : it simply isn't designed for it. All that might achieve is bring the terminal closer to the weapon when it activates.*

*It discards this course of action, and immediately moves on to the next one. From its observations, the coordination of the slave-sparks is their greatest advantage. It lets them leverage their mechanical weaponry for maximum effect despite their lack of a truly unified awareness like that of its agents. In order for the threat to its purpose to be removed, that advantage must be taken from them.*

*One of its agents is suited for the task. It has already succeeded in hunting and eliminating the leadership caste of the slave-sparks which previously inhabited its lair, which kept them from becoming a nuisance. It has been upgraded with the ability to conceal its presence from every sense of the slave-sparks for short periods, and is sufficiently lethal in its own right. But the slave-sparks will be aware of this vulnerability, and they have many assets its agent cannot face directly. A distraction is needed.*

*Its mouths speak, adjusting the orders it sends, and the largest agents it currently has on this planet begin to move.*

---

Inside her Hüne, Frieda Wotjek watches, and waits, suppressing her and her mount's desire to stride forth and join the fray, to let loose their shared fury upon the Progeny. She and the

other eight pilots have received very clear instructions : they are not to waste energy on the numberless horde of the Progeny unless they receive direct orders to the contrary. They are too important, and there's always the risk that one of the beasts might get lucky and cripple them – or deploy some kind of counter they haven't prepared for.

Instead, their focus is on the Kinder, the spawn of Being K which most closely resemble their nightmarish creator. On the way from the mustering point at Tiegenhoff, Frieda and the other pilots were briefed on Projekt K, and told everything Division Y knows on the Kinder. Before the Solstice Event, these particular Mythos entities had only been summoned twice : once during the initial testing of the Kindermärchen's contents at Castle Schwartzstein, and again against the Dacian Army, in Division Y's first field deployment (at least, as far as Frieda knows).

In theory, the Hünen's weapons should be able to hurt the Kinder, despite their tough hide and incredible regenerative abilities. They'd been able to hurt the Ivory Blasphemy in Remula, and the Congregation's last-ditch attempt to doom the world had been a higher-class entity than the Kinder. For obvious reasons, they couldn't test this beforehand, but that's fine. Frieda trusts the occultists; more than that, she trusts the strength of her Hüne.

Lieutenants König and Neumann are on the Hüne's shoulders, like they were at Bovariastadt. Back then, Frieda thought there wasn't anything she could possibly despise more than the Eikons, who dared to invade her Fatherland and twist the minds of its people.

She was wrong. At least the Eikons' indoctrination could be healed, their victims saved from Being X's insidious control. There is no hope for any of the Progeny to return to Humanity : the occultists tried everything they could on captured specimens, and didn't find anything. The brass made sure everyone in the Allied Forces knows, to make sure nobody hesitates at the idea of shooting something which was once a civilian.

Death is the only mercy they can give to the Progeny – death, and vengeance upon their destroyer. It is a cold comfort, but it's all they've got.

For now, the Kinder have remained immobile, standing amidst the defiled ruins of Moskva. But that cannot last, and predictably, it doesn't.

As the defensive line buckles yet holds under the strain, there is a shift in the terrible noise produced by the Dark Mother. As one, the Kinder start marching, threading ponderously amidst the horde of lesser monstrosities. Looking at them from afar, they appear slow, but that's only an illusion : with how large they are, they're easily keeping up with the rest of the Progeny.

Frieda notes that, despite the Kinder's size and the Progeny's frenzy, none of the Lycans are crushed underfoot by the greater horrors as they advance. They seem to flow around the Kinder, dodging their enormous limbs on instinct. She doesn't think human soldiers could achieve that level of coordination, and the sight of this sends a shiver down her spine as it reminds her of the true, awful nature of the foe.

As the Kinder enter the killing zone, artillery shells start slamming into them. There is some damage, but it regenerates too quickly for anything but concentrated fire to have any chance

of taking them down, and the Allied Forces cannot afford the distraction. Just by walking forward, the Kinder are shielding the horde with their bodies, leading to more beasts making it through.

Frieda leans forward, the Hüne mimicking her movements. She doesn't leave her position, though : she is too well-trained a soldier to move without orders in anything but the most urgent of situations. They have to wait for the signal, which she knows she won't be able to miss – and she is right.

Frieda's mount senses it first : a spike of mana gathering in the sky, far beyond the reach of any aerial mage using a single-core computation orb. Then she hears it, echoing across the battlefield and through the Hüne's armor in defiance of all acoustic principles. To her human ears, it sounds like a gentle lullaby, reminding her of her mother singing to her after a nightmare, years ago now. But to the Wunderwaffe to which she's bound, it is something else entirely – it is a wave, a command, a prayer, a decree, a lever being pulled which causes the unseen gears of the universe to turn.

It is the Director, playing a tune on the flute she took out of the Black Vaults of Castle Schwartzstein – the Flute of the Dark Mother, the very artefact which she used to unleash Projekt K on the Dacian Army. Back then, the Director was able to dismiss the Kinder she'd summoned once they had crushed the Dacian troops : it is the hope of the Allied Forces that it can do the same here.

Frieda tenses, all her senses honed on the Kinder's lumbering forms as the Director's song reaches them. The Hüne can 'see' how the Flute's influence clashes against the eldritch ties linking the Kinder to Being K, how the Flute's music battles with the bleating of the Dark Mother. Translated into something her human mind can comprehend, it looks like tendrils of blue moonlight reaching out to the Kinder and knotting themselves around black and green growths, like serpents or tree roots fighting.

The Kinder don't disappear, don't return to whatever hellish realm they came from. They didn't plan for it to happen : that would be too easy, though Frieda cannot help the flicker of disappointment she feels. Still, the Flute clearly has an effect of some kind, as they slow down, then stop. Reading the body language of such living nightmares is an exercise in madness, but Frieda likes to imagine they're confused, unsure of what's happening – maybe even afraid, if the Progeny are capable of such.

No matter the Kinder's current mental state, this isn't an opportunity they can afford to waste, and Frieda's superiors realize it immediately.

*"All Hünen,"* the voice of Colonel Lergen comes over the communication network, crisp and cool, *"engage the Kinder while they're distracted !"*

Frieda laughs mirthlessly as she mentally commands her mount to charge. The Hüne is eager for battle, and that bloodlust flows through their link to mix with her own – she has seen so many horrors on the way to Moskva, and heard reports of many more. She looks forward to venting her anger on some deserving target, though she knows better than to let her anger affect her actions.

Across the line, the rest of Projekt H follows suit, as does the American Titan. Ten of Humanity's greatest feats of arcano-engineering march against a dozen of Being K's largest abominations, a battle of giants the likes of which the world has never seen. The Alliance's warmachines attack in pairs, taking advantage of the Kinder's immobility while it lasts (they don't know how long that will be, whether they will eventually break from the Flute's influence or the Director will have to stop first, but it's obvious it won't last forever).

Simple arithmetic dictates that one of the Hünen must have the Titan as a partner, and the randomness of their position on the line means the honor is Frieda's. She moves ahead of the American, both because the Hünen are more suited to close-quarters combat, and because she's the one with actual experience in battling giant abominations spawned by high-Class Mythos entities.

The Allied giants crush the Progeny underfoot as they stride, whatever alien coordination which allows the beasts to avoid the Kinder's hooves not protecting them from the metal boots of Hünen and Titan. Through her link with her mount, Frieda feels the beasts' bones break and their tainted viscera paint the feet of her Hüne, and shivers in revulsion at the sensation.

Once they are less than a hundred meters from their target, Frieda fires a beam of blue energy at the Kind. The attack leaves a deep gouge into the flesh of the creature, and a torrent of blackish ichor pours out. The beast stumbles, but manages to catch itself without falling, and within a few seconds the wound is already starting to close over as its regeneration takes effect.

"Wotjek reporting to command," she announces, hands tight on the two controller orbs of her mount. "I have confirmation that Projekt M-derivated weaponry is capable of harming the Kinder, but not to disable their regeneration with a single shot, over."

*"Understood, Wotjek,"* replies Colonel Lergen. *"All Hünen, follow the plan and overwhelm their regeneration."*

That is their best hope : that, when facing with a weapon capable of truly harming them (as opposed to the pitiful gunfire of the Dacian Army, which could barely penetrate the outermost skin layers of the first Wunderwaffen ever deployed), the healing factor of the Kinder has a limit. Based on the regeneration of the Werwölfe and the Fiends of the Nameless City, this seems likely : if you can inflict damage faster than the enemy can regenerate it, then you can kill them eventually.

It's just going to be long and bloody work, and generally, the Mythos entity isn't going to just sit here and take it.

In this case, however, since the Kind is still immobile, she keeps firing, every shot hitting center of mass – not that such accuracy is anything to be proud of, given the bulk of her target. Soon, the air around the beast is filled with a black mist as ichor flows from its injuries. Frieda hears the other Hünen report the same result with their own targets, but despite their efforts, none of the Kinder have fallen.

Then the Titan brings up its main armaments, a massive engine which makes up most of its right arm. Compared to her Hüne's own ranged Projekt K-derived ranged weaponry, it is painfully slow to charge – but then, the Americans have only been working on their 'death rays' for a fraction of the time Division Y has been able to perfect their arsenal.

*"Brace for discharge,"* the Titan's pilot calls out over the radio (he isn't powerful enough magically to use a communication spell, which Frieda still finds weird). Arcs of energy are running across the metal giant, leaping between plates, and there is a sound of pressure building that reminds Frieda far too much of a pressure cooker on the verge of exploding.

The superweapon fires, and Frieda is forced to admit the American scientists did some damn good work. There is light, and the smell of fire and lightning briefly fills her mount's extra-normal perceptions. When her vision returns, the entire upper half of the Kind's massive body is just gone, leaving a smoking crater in its place.

For several seconds, it remains standing, and Frieda is struck by the horrific doubt that even *that* might not be enough to stop the Kinder. Then, with the kind of slowness typically associated with avalanches, its legs buckle and it falls, never to rise again, *finally* crushing several dozens of lesser Progeny that fail to get out of the way in time underneath it.

Inside the Hüne's piloting chamber, Frieda lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding. She isn't sure whether it is truly dead : the Progeny's biology is an affront to nature at the best of time (and yes, she is aware she is currently sitting inside a summoned horror from beyond the stars covered in metal). But it's not moving, and that's good enough for now.

*"Target down,"* she hears König announce, with a slight inclination of voice betraying his surprise that no one who doesn't know him well could pick up. *"Move to the next one."*

*"Understood,"* comes the reply of the Titan's pilot – a tall brute of a man Frieda met before the Operation's start, who was surprisingly polite to a slip of a girl ten years younger once he realized she was an aerial mage before becoming a Hüne pilot.

Frieda and the Titan are half-way to their next target when the Flute's melody abruptly stops. On instinct, she looks up, bending the thick neck of the Hüne to direct its eyes toward the skies.

She sees the Director, no longer playing the Flute – no longer flying under her own power, it looks like, as another mage is holding her. There is no sign of enemy action aimed at her, not that the Progeny have shown anything that could threaten Major Degurechaff when she is surrounded by a guard of recently-resurrected Untoten and Nazzadi mages.

So far, at least, she hastens to amend the thought, having spent too much time on the battlefield to taunt fate like that.

Without the Flute's song keeping them quiescent, the Kinder swiftly awaken from their torpor. The one Frieda and the Titan are targeting begin galloping, its legs moving far quicker than anything that size has any right to be. It's going right for the Titan, and Frieda knows at once that, somehow, it (or rather, the alien intelligence directing it) has identified it as the greatest threat.

"Step back !" she shouts, and moves to intercept.

Up close, the beast looks even bigger. It is about the same height as the Hüne, although its body keeps shifting shape, and its total mass far outweighs the Wunderwaffe. As it approaches, she brings up her left arm and pushes her claw into the mass of the Kind, tearing into its flesh with disgusting ease. A torrent of ichor erupts from the wound, but the beast doesn't even seem to notice, and keeps moving forward with all the subtlety of a battering ram.

It smashes against the shield König and Neumann bring up just in time, but the kinetic energy bleeding off from the impact is enough to force the Hüne to take several staggering steps backward. At the same time, Frieda feels the wards on the Hüne's chassis flare up, pushing back Being K's influence as it tries to jump from the Progeny-born eldritch horror to the Imperial-made one. Bile fills her mouth in reaction, but she forces herself to swallow : there is far too much priceless equipment in the pilot chamber for her to vomit.

Tentacles erupt from the Kind, lashing out at the shield, every blow strong enough to crush a tank to pieces. Frieda wishes they could use the dimensional-shifting spell which served them so well at Bovariastadt, but with Being K's presence messing with the local space-time, that's impossible. They don't know what will happen if they try, but given how volatile the spell formula is in the first place and how much testing and fine-tuning it took before the Director authorized its use on the battlefield, it wouldn't be anything good.

This fight will be hard, but Frieda thinks of all the soldiers on the battlefield fighting for their lives, for the lives of all people everywhere, and she and her Hüne bellow their determination as they run back at the Kind, to keep it busy while the Titan tries to get a good angle to shoot it dead, dead, *dead*.

---

Behind the frontline of the most important battle in the history of the world stand a bunch of large white tents, each marked with a red cross – a relatively recent symbol in the history of Mankind, but one that is already known worldwide nonetheless. Within the largest of these hastily-constructed refuges, directing the efforts of dozens of medical personnel, Doctor Iosefka is leading her own war against death. It is a battle no less bloody and hard-fought than the one being waged outside, and one that has been ongoing since the first ape-like human being realized there were things they could do to keep their brethren alive.

Wounded soldiers are brought in on stretchers carried by dedicated teams of three runners, who go back and forth between the medical center and the frontline. The men they bring are bleeding and broken, missing parts of them lost to the ravenous hunger of the Progeny. Now that the beasts have reached the defensive line due to the Kinder blocking some of the artillery fire, not a moment passes without more being brought in. Yet Iosefka knows that this flow is but a fraction of the casualties of the Allied Forces : most who fall simply die where they stood, slaughtered by the unholy beasts.

The knowledge of it burns, but she cannot help the dead. Despite all the advances of Division Y where magical healing is concerned, despite all the miracles wrought within the halls of Castle Schwartzstein, that much remains the province of God alone, and if He is involved at all in this battle, then He is being infuriatingly subtle and mysterious about it.

But Iosefka can still help those who are brought to her, and she does so.

She will not stop. With spells and bandages, with bone-saw and disinfectant, with blood transfusions and a hundred, a thousand more tools of her craft, she keeps working, keeps shouting orders, keeps forcing order to the chaos through sheer will – and her people answer. Medical mages and Imperial doctors, from Division Y, the Eastern Army, or brought from the rest of the Reich along with the artillery pieces even now raining death upon the horde : all of them follow her lead without question. Even the medics of the Unified States' contingent have joined the effort, because here like outside, things like nationality and creed mean nothing compared to their shared goal :

To save one more life. And then, after that, one more, and one more, and one more still.

Always, always one more. That is the oath of the medic in war, the only promise that can be kept when that dread beast, far more terrible than any Mythos entity dragged from beyond the veil by the folly of men, comes calling.

When Iosefka swore that oath, she had no idea of the true horror of war. She was too young to remember the last conflict to tear the Europan continent asunder, and this war was a magnitude more terrible from the start anyway, even before the Director let loose Division Y's creations.

Now she knows. She has faced more gruesome injuries than those of the soldiers she now heals, back in Castle Schwartzstein, when one experiment or another went wrong, but never in such vast numbers. There is blood *everywhere*, despite their best efforts to avoid contamination, and she has a feeling she won't ever be able to scrub her hands clean.

But that doesn't matter. She is a doctor; she will help those she can.

She whispers her oath to herself under her breath as she sews a soldier's guts back in, in between shouting orders with a voice that's becoming hoarser by the moment. The familiar words anchor her to the moment; they keep her focused, keep her sane. It is an oath, a prayer, and a promise, one which has been sworn by learned minds in one form or another for centuries :

*Primum non nocere ...*

---

Before joining Division Y, Micolash was nothing. The fourth son of a minor noble family, he never achieved anything of worth, and his parents and siblings always made sure he knew it. He was more interested in books than glory and wealth, and had neither the patience for nor the understanding of the games of prestige and politicking that seemed so important to everyone around him for some unfathomable reason. Even his magical potential was too weak to qualify him for the aerial mage corps, not that he had any interest in joining the Army in the first place – he knew the kind of training they were subjected to, and he'd no interest in suffering it himself.

He knows his father arranged his transfer to Division Y so as to get him out of view, while still being able to claim his son was serving the Fatherland. Truth be told, Micolash didn't

mind. There were plenty of books to read in Castle Schwartzstein he had never heard of before, and people who actually knew what he was talking about when he went on one of his rants about ancient history and myths.

But then the Director came. She wasn't the Director then, of course, but it was clear from the onset that she was something special, and she took charge almost as soon as she arrived in the castle. Micolash, unlike others, had seen it immediately. She hadn't come to Division Y in unspoken exile like him and most of the others, but because she genuinely thought they could serve the Empire by mastering the secrets of the universe.

And such secrets they learned. Such wonderful horrors, such horrifying wonders. Micolash was here when the Denkmaschine was turned on for the first time; he was here when the first Class One entity was summoned in controlled conditions using a ritual it had reconstructed, proving that there was *something* to what they called Elder Magic then.

Since then, his mind has been opened, and he has followed the Director's lead into places Man was never intended to walk. He has gained knowledge he could never have imagined before coming to Division Y, and he will never regret it.

He knows this came at a cost. His dreams are no longer his own, despite all the safety precautions the Director put into place, and his body is failing, the result of performing too many pioneering experiments, before proper protocols were designed. It is only thanks to a cocktail of stimulants, not all of which were the product of Imperial science, that he can be here on the field of battle, instead of slowly withering away in his bed.

It is a shame, but if not him, then it would have been someone else in his place, and Micolash likes his occultist colleagues. Besides, the fact that Doctor Iosefka gives him only a couple of years left to live at best is the reason why he is here, on the frontline, instead of back in the magic circles casting support spells for the aerial mages.

The soldiers around him are casting wary glances in his direction. Micolash knows he doesn't look like much, wearing a trooper's helmet on his head and a lab coat with embroidered occult sigils on his body. If not for the emblem of Division Y on his shoulder, he has no doubt the glances would be a lot more disdainful.

As the horde of Progeny gets closer, Micolash looks down. In his hands, he holds an innocuous-seeming injector, not that different from the ones used by the Director herself for the Kosmosblut. The contents, however, are far different.

Micolash knows that, if he uses it, the serum will kill him. It has killed every single one of the ten death row inmates on whom it was tested before the Director pulled the plug and closed this avenue of research. But he is dying already, and using it might just be enough to let a few more soldiers survive this day.

Elsewhere across the line, there are others like him, who have given their lives to Division Y already and are looking for a way to make their deaths mean something as well. Each of them carry a different object taken from the Black Vaults at the Director's orders; each of them is ready to die to help stop the Dark Mother. In a moment of dark humor, the Director called them her 'Suicide Squad', before immediately apologizing for her lack of tact.

It was, Micolash reflects, the only time he ever saw the Director act like a flustered child of her apparent age. The memory brings a brief smile to his lips. It is good, he reflects, that their leader should still possess some measure of humanity, for all her great intellect and terrible power. After all, power without conscience is precisely what they face now.

Thanks to the Kinder joining the fray and acting as living cover to their lesser brethren, the Progeny are beginning to push on the defensive line. In response, Colonel Lergen has given the order to activate the 'Suicide Squad' to take some of the pressure off the Allied Forces' mundane soldiers.

It is, objectively, the correct decision. Still, Micolash doesn't envy the Colonel for having to make it. He's never talked with the Director's favorite military officer, but he's seen him around, and Lergen looked very, very stressed indeed.

Hopefully he'll be able to get some well-needed and better-deserved leave time once this whole mess is over. But, one way or the other, Micolash won't be there to see it.

"For the Fatherland, then," the occultist whispers to himself, not even able to hear himself over the cacophony of the battle, and jams the injector against his scrawny neck before activating it. There is a slight pain as the needle pierces his skin, but it is completely eclipsed as the serum takes effect.

*Fire*. It burns through his veins like lightning, until it reaches his heart. In the time between heartbeats, it pools within Micolash's core, then the muscle beats, and the fire erupts, spreading across his entire body. A green inferno, too powerful for his frail flesh to contain.

But that is fine. Micolash never intended to contain it. The serum's formula is derived from ancient texts which supposedly held the secrets to a fire-breathing spell, something which must have been quite the showstopper back in the old days but is little more than a party trick in the modern era. Once the fragments were fed to the Denkmaschine, however, something far more powerful came out.

Micolash smiles. Strangely, there is no pain anymore. He suspects that is because the pain receptors of his human body simply have no idea what the Hell is happening to him. He would like to make a note of it for the record, but his teeth have started to melt inside his mouth, fusing them shut, so he cannot share this new insight with the people around him (who are edging away from him anyway), and holding a pen would be difficult with the tips of his fingers burning away to reveal green fire.

Oh well. So be it.

He instinctively knows how to use the fire within to propel himself forward, how to make it flow from his hands, his mouth, his eyes. The researchers who developed and tested the serum thought that's because it connects the user to another Mythos entity, the one the green fire comes from – like the fog of Projekt N, and the horrors of Projekt K. The fact the fire can only be used to destroy is another reason why the Director forbade further research into the matter : they already have enough problems with two Class Ten entities meddling with the affairs of men.

He comes down in the middle of the Progeny, burning a spot for him to land with a stream of fire that consumes his feet in the process. Then he is fire and he is death. He keeps moving by pouring more fire from the burned stumps of his legs, and unleashes great waves of green flames from his hands that consume hundreds of beasts at a time. An aerial mage can do the same with a good orb and advanced attack spells, but the serum gives Micolash unlimited castings until his body gives out, and every aerial mage is needed elsewhere.

Micolash burns the spawn of the Dark Mother, but more come, always more. The malign intelligence directing them has detected him now, and it wants him removed, regardless of the cost. Even as his brain boils within his skull, part of Micolash wonders if it senses the touch of the pseudo-fire-based entity from which the serum is derived on him. He hopes one of his colleagues is taking notes for later analysis.

The thought makes him laugh, or perhaps it's the fever making him delirious. His melted teeth part once more, molten ivory flying like spittle, and once he starts, he cannot stop, and he laughs, laughs, laughs.

He is still laughing when he is finally brought down by a score of Lycans, their claws and fangs tearing him apart.

As he dies, Micolash wonders if his family will be proud of him now, but to his own, final, pleased surprise, he finds that does not much care.

In the end, he found his own worth.

---

General Hutton wonders if he has died and gone to Hell. Really, it seems like the most reasonable explanation for this nightmare.

He came to Europa ready to fight the Empire's monsters, but this is something else entirely. For all the terror they left in their wake, the Imperial Wunderwaffen have always been tightly controlled, and deployed sparingly, always in support of the rest of the Imperial Army's efforts.

This is not that. Standing in the command center, looking down at a live magical projection of the battle, the American General feels his blood freeze, even as he does his best to keep it from being visible on his face.

There is control behind the Progeny's actions, but it only makes them more horrifying. The part of him that still thinks like a child raised under the tenets of the Church cannot help but think that they are faced a divine scourge, sent by a god more malevolent than the foulest blasphemer could ever have imagined.

What good can mortal men do before such evil ?

Still, he will be damned, quite possibly literally, if he lets his fear affect his leadership. So he keeps up a strong front as reports come in from all across the line through radio and communication spells. Him, Lergen, and a handful of other officers are shouting orders, moving reserve forces into position to plug gaps and delay the inevitable – and it is

inevitable. The Kinder being successfully held back has bought them more time, but there is no question that sooner or later, the Progeny will break through.

The only question is whether they can hold them long enough to fire the Wunderwaffe atop the hill and take out the source of this madness. Last they heard from the magical engineers, the work was on schedule, but –

Hutton's train of thoughts is interrupted by a shrill scream of terror and agony that ends abruptly, its source far too close for comfort. The American General stands, throwing his chair to the ground in his haste, and turns in time to see the cause of the scream tear a section of the command tent open and stalk inside.

His mind rebels at the sight. Until now, he's only seen the Progeny on photographs and magical records, as well as a few autopsies. To witness one of them alive and in motion is something else entirely, and his respect for the soldiers holding the line increases even further, even as another part of him notes that this particular example of Being K's flesh-crafting is unlike anything he's seen in the scouting reports.

It is big, bigger than the Lycans and the Satyrs, though mercifully not nearly as large as the Kinder. It has too many mouths, one on its head and several on its torso, between rows of leaking teats. On its canine head, four goat-like eyes blaze with undeniable intelligence, surrounded by a mane of red hair, falling down like a bloody waterfall.

And the stench, dear God, the stench. It fills the tent, a musky scent that completely overpowers that of the gore from the beast's victims. It simultaneously make Hutton want to puke, to scream, to indulge in desires he'd no idea his brain was capable of conjuring.

The beast stalks forward, its gaze fixed on the Imperial officer next to Hutton.

***"Colonel Lergen,"*** it growls, the words making it seem even more abominable despite being perfectly understandable Imperial – because nothing that looks like that should be able to talk. ***"Mother has sent me for you."***

"You speak," says Lergen, sounding utterly unworried by the fact there is a monster in their command center (and not one of the ones which are on their side). "Interesting. We thought the Satyrs were the only breed of Progeny capable of mimicking intelligence. What are you, creature ?"

***"I helped Mother Russy come to Her children,"*** growls the beast. ***"She remembers, and honors me for it. I am Her voice and Her herald, and now, I am Her knife, to silence those who dare attempt to harm Her."***

"Ah. A former cultist, then," replied Lergen, still looking and sounding impossibly calm – disdainful, even. "But you're wrong. You are a slave, nothing more. And no matter how favored by your master you might be, a slave you shall remain."

The beast makes a noise like several kittens drowning, and it takes a moment for Hutton to realize it's laughing.

***"We are all slaves in the end, Lergen. But … You might yet join Her children."*** It reaches up with one of its paws to touch one of its leaking teats, the gesture somehow disgustingly obscene. ***"You need only kneel and partake of Her bounty through me, and She will remake you as She has remade Her children. One such as you would be welcomed, given a place of honor in the world that is to come."***

"I am a Colonel of the Imperial Army," sneers Lergen. "We do not accept bribes, and we do not kneel to monsters. We *kill* them."

There is a brief pause, just long enough for Hutton to wonder where the fuck are their reinforcements. The radios are still on, after all, so someone must have heard them talking. Why in God's name haven't the mages come down to deal with this monster ?! Come to think of it, how did it even manage to sneak into the camp in the first place ?!

***"Then you will die, and your flesh shall serve Mother Russy in a different way,"*** declares the beast, before charging straight at them.

On instinct, Hutton draws his firearm and shoots. He's a General, but he hasn't always been one, and he still spends time at the shooting range to keep his skills sharp. All that training means that, even now, his hand is steady, and the single shot he manages to get off hit the beast's grotesque head.

Predictably, it does nothing. It is a pointless gesture, and Hutton knew before he pulled the trigger. But it's hard to suppress your instincts, and besides, what was he supposed to do ? Not shoot the twisted monstrosity as it comes to kill him ? Even pointless defiance is better than meekly surrendering in the face of certain death.

Then the Albish witch, Niniane, leaps from behind the desk where she was hiding to stand between Lergen and the beast. She is holding a silver cross in her hand, brandishing it before her like a talisman, and for an instant Hutton thinks the girl has gone mad and is going to try to exorcise the monster – which, sure, might *look* like a demon called forth to plague the world by heretical madmen, but he's fairly sure if that worked Division Y would have found out and weaponized it by now. Especially given what happened at the Holy See.

Then the cross glows with a golden light, which forms a barrier around her and Lergen, and the beast's claws bounce off it.

It snarls, a sound entirely devoid of humanity. It smashes at the barrier, again and again, and Hutton sees Niniane wince with every blow. The General isn't well-versed in magic : he knows more than most due to having been granted command of Research Group 51, but he's no mage himself. But it's obvious that the girl's getting tired, and won't be able to keep the barrier up much longer.

He glances sideways, and sees Lergen standing there, staring at the beast on the other side of the shield. The Imperial officer still doesn't look afraid : he has drawn his own pistol, and is checking it as if nothing was wrong.

Then a new figure rushes through the opening left by the beast in the side of the command tent. Despite the speed at which it moves, Hutton recognizes it from his briefing on the assets

brought by Division Y to Operation Gottesmörder, thanks to the adrenaline flowing through his veins distorting his perception of time.

At first glance, it resembles the powered armors of Research Group 51. It is a bit taller, though, and unlike the bare metal of Teslus' creations, it is made of a smooth white material. There is an undeniable artistry to the whole thing, especially when contrasted with the unholy horror of the Progeny beast.

But then, you see the male human head atop its torso. A helmet of the same white material covers it almost completely, but the mouth and eyes are visible. It is as if someone took an antique marble statue, beheaded it, and put a fresh human head atop it instead.

"Hello, Natasha," says the mechanical creature as it wrestles with the Progeny on the ground, sending pieces of furniture flying. Its voice is rough, which is probably due to the fact it doesn't have any flesh below the neck : Hutton doesn't know how much of its vocal chords is left, but he doesn't think it's a lot.

'Totenkopf' is the name it was given on the briefing materials Hutton read. Now, the American General isn't ashamed to admit his knowledge of Imperial was a bit rusty before he got sent to Europa, but he did his best to brush up on his schooling on the way across the ocean. But it doesn't exactly take a linguist to translate that to 'Deathshead'.

He isn't sure whether whoever named the poor bastard was making a joke, or just being painfully descriptive. He isn't sure which option is worse.

He's also very much not thinking about why he's speaking with a distinct Albish accent. This has 'diplomatic incident' written all over it, and not only is now hardly the time for those, Hutton makes it a policy only to get involved in the ones he started himself, which is probably the only reason the diplomatic corps haven't had him quietly murdered in his sleep.

***"Christopher,"*** replies the beast – Natasha ? What the hell's the story here ? Hutton has no idea, and he's got a feeling that's for the best. ***"What have they done to you ?"***

"No worse than what happened to you, I reckon. Let's take this outside, shall we ?"

With a mighty punch, Totenkopf bends the beast in two, before tackling it and dragging it outside like a football player whose coach has bribed the referee not to call a foul. A strange quiet falls on the command center, broken only by the tinny voices coming out of the radio speakers as new intel continues to come in, along with urgent questions as to what just happened.

"Shouldn't we move elsewhere ?" Hutton manages to say to no one in particular. "If it comes back …"

"What would be the point ?" replies Lergen with a shrug. "If Totenkopf cannot kill it, then we are dead anyway. There is no way we could move fast enough to avoid it, so we might as well make ourselves useful as long as we can."

For a second, Hutton stares at the Imperial Colonel, who looks utterly unperturbed. Then he finally sees the veritable river of sweat running down the other man's forehead. Perversely, the sight reassures him, as it tells him that Lergen still feels fear, meaning that he isn't insane, or at least not anymore insane than any of them.

"I suppose you're right," the American General nods, and they both turn their focus back to the comms station, pretending not to hear the sounds of the closest battle. If nothing else, they can make sure the transition of command is as smooth as possible.

Although, of course, all things being equal, Hutton would much prefer not being killed by a hideous monstrosity from the darkest pit of Hell.

---

Christopher Ward, once Agent 404 of the Allied Kingdom Secret Services, now recorded in the annals of Division Y only as 'Subject Totenkopf', is fighting with every bit of strength the Imperials have, for their own incomprehensible reasons, decided to give him.

When he realized what had happened to him, Christopher Ward begged to die. Who wouldn't, in his place ? Giving one's life for one's country is one thing : he accepted that possibility years ago, when he joined the Secret Services. But this living death, sustained by eldritch magic and forbidden science, is something else entirely.

It is possible, Christopher supposes, that some people would be willing to continue living in his current condition. He doubts they would keep thinking that after experiencing it, though. There is a difference between living and existing he never could have appreciated before, when he could still enjoy the simple pleasures of life that are now forever denied to him.

What has been done to him would be a war crime, if he actually was connected to the Allied Kingdom in any official capacity. But he isn't, so none of the treaties between civilized nations apply to him. It is still a horror and a blasphemy, a transgression against any God deserving of worship, though.

Christopher can, with great reluctance, understand why Division Y resurrected him in the first place after they found his cooling corpse in the snow after the break-in of Castle Schwartzstein. They needed to know what had become of the Kindermärchen he'd helped Natasha steal, and the Solstice Event and what followed proved they were right to be willing to go to any length to recover it.

But they should have left him die as soon as he answered their questions. Instead, they turned him into another of their supersoldiers, digging out some old concept notes for a 'full body prosthesis' one of their pet madmen had come up with years ago. He tried to force their hand by going on a rampage the moment they turned it on, but they were careful, and Degurechaff, that fiend in the shape of a young girl, has the Devil's own silver tongue. She convinced him that whatever the Federation would do with the Kindermärchen was partially on his head, and he could die once he'd helped clean up the mess he'd caused.

She also promised that if he somehow survives this battle, Division Y will put him down, before arranging for his mortal remains (including the rest of his body, which is kept in a morgue somewhere in their headquarters) to be shipped off to Albion for proper burial. So,

between being blackmailed with his duty to his homeland and his desire to be buried there, Christopher reluctantly accepted – after all, he can always die later.

These are the kind of dismal thoughts that have occupied Christopher for the last few weeks. He would have liked to distract himself by fighting the Progeny during their march to Moskva, but Degurechaff vetoed it. She thought Being K could see through its creations' eyes, and wanted to keep as many of the Allied Forces' assets concealed as possible.

Christopher can admire her paranoia, if nothing else. That, and the fact that, in a roundabout way, she gave him a chance to claim revenge on his killer – although there is nothing he can think of that could possibly be worse than what happened to Natasha. He doesn't know how he knew who the monster was the moment he saw her – she wasn't a mage, and it's not like he can recognize mana signature now anyway – but there is no doubt whatsoever in his mind.

He and Natasha are fighting through the camp, lashing at each other with inhuman strength. The rest of the soldiers are keeping their distance – there are only mundane troops back here, every supersoldier save him being needed on the frontline due to the Kinder's advance increasing the pressure. Which, in hindsight, might have been a mistake, but they'd no idea Being K had infiltrators at its disposal : even now, Christopher cannot understand how Natasha made it so far past their line without being detected.

And he heard enough radio chatter to know that the situation on the frontline isn't so much balanced on a knife's edge as it is impaled on one and bleeding to keep it stable. So it falls to him to deal with the situation.

The Zertrümmerer Array is made of orichalcum, the same material as Division Y's weird automatons and Captain Weiss' arm. It is strong, far stronger than any metal Christopher knows of. But it still has limits, and the thing Natasha has become is strong beyond what the laws of nature allow, too.

In the midst of the brutal melee, Christopher can't use the ranged weaponry built into his arm, not here in the middle of the Alliance camp, where any bullet that misses its mark could kill someone important to the war effort. Besides, he has a feeling even the high-caliber machine gun wouldn't be able to hurt Natasha now.

There is nothing elegant, subtle or dignified about the fight between the two monsters the Russy and Albish spies have become. They fight like two feral animals wrestling in a muddy field, Natasha's claws tearing at the array's magical material even as Christopher's fists bury into her flesh, ripping fur and bloody meat apart. There is no pain, but Christopher can still feel the complex machinery keeping him … let's go with 'alive' for now, being damaged.

He kicks and punches, drawing on brawling lessons learned in the shadowy back alleys of a hundred cities across the globe. The ground shakes with the strength of his blows, dirt flying around the two combatants.

Natasha growls as they fight, bestial, brutish noises that are nothing at all like the ones she made during the nights they shared as they crossed the snow-covered mountains of the Reich on the way to Castle Schwartzstein.

Vaguely, Christopher hears screams and shouts around them, and the unmistakable noise of M-912 rifles being charged. He wishes they would just shoot and kill them both, but the discipline of Division Y's troopers is too strong : they won't fire while there is a friendly in the line of fire, except in the most pressing of circumstances.

Bones and orichalcum break, and ichor and oil spill onto the earth. Nothing will grow here for a thousand years – nothing natural, at least.

"I'm afraid there was never going to be a happy ending for us, luv," he manages to grunt in between blows.

Then, to his absolute shock, Natasha freezes. He immediately suspects a trick of some kind, bracing himself for anything – a magical attack she hasn't shown so far, some kind of acidic spit that can eat through his head's protections – but nothing happens. She simply lies there, pinned underneath him, trembling as she looks up at him.

***"Please,"*** she whines, and for the first time since she shot him in the back and left him to bleed out in the snow, Christopher thinks he can hear a hint of the woman he knew in the bestial voice. ***"An ending ? Now ?"***

Christopher reflexively tries to swallow, but he cannot – he doesn't have saliva anymore, just some kind of bitter-tasting preserving solution that keeps his mouth functioning so he can talk.

"Yeah," he says at last. "I can give you that much."

Christopher rears up, bringing both hands together in the air. Natasha's brief immobility – perhaps a trap, perhaps a genuine instant of clarity resulting of an internal struggle he cannot possibly imagine – ends, and she bites and tears at his exposed torso. But it's too late to stop him.

He brings down his joined fists with all the strength he can muster, and crushes her skull, pulping her brain. The monster Natasha has become, punishment – or perhaps, in whatever passes for the Dark Mother's mind, reward – for unwittingly bringing this doom to Russy, finally dies. Seventeen seconds later, so does Christopher Ward, his life support finally failing from the damage to the Zertrümmerer array, leaving the two of them locked in a final embrace.

His final breath, such as it is within the preservative fluid, is a relieved one.

For him at least, the nightmare is over, and his duty is done.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Oh wow, I am really racking up the killcount of named and new characters, aren't I ? But, given that this is THE big battle of the story, I think that was inevitable.

I'm not totally happy with how this chapter ended up, but I could spend weeks more working on it and never be satisfied.

Thanks to everyone for your kind words on the last chapter. You probably won't be surprised to hear that my initial estimate of how many chapters will be needed to cover the battle might have been overly optimistic.

As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter, and look forward to your thoughts on it.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

***August 4th, 1926 – Moskva, the Lair of the Dark Mother***

*Its infiltration agent has failed. The slave-sparks' leaders still live, and its largest agents are being deactivated one by one by the slave-sparks' constructs. Meanwhile, the weapon is approaching completion. It knows this, because it can feel the potential of its attack growing nearer to actuality : such is its power, it echoes through more dimensions than the slave-sparks can comprehend.*

*That is unacceptable. It considers its options again, now with appropriately elevated risk and allowable sacrifice thresholds.*

*Despite the changes wrought by the largest agents available to it, its agents on the ground cannot reach the weapon in time. The slave-sparks have revealed several assets it was unaware of : this means they were deliberately concealed from its scouting agents during their march toward its lair.*

*It also implies the possibility that there are more yet to be deployed. The deduction is not unwelcome, merely accepted and taken into account as it continues to calculate the correct response.*

*There is no more time for careful probes to reveal the slave-sparks' full capabilities. The weapon must be disabled immediately. It examines several paths, considering each in turn with cold, emotionless logic, before selecting the one its operating parameters dictate to be the appropriate one.*

*This course of action will expose its primary terminal to harm; that is why it hasn't resorted to it until now, as the precepts which inform its every move require that its primary terminal be protected and able to continue operating. But that does not matter to it : all that matters is that it is the course of action its purpose dictates.*

*It does not panic, or hesitate : it merely acts. Once more, its mouths adjust their output, sending new commands to its agents. At the same time, the tendrils it has burrowed into the ground twitch as energy courses through them, going from its core to the breeding pods it has seeded across its lair.*

*The agents within these pods were created after it learned of the extranatural capabilities possessed by the slave-sparks of this world. They were meant to assist it in harvesting and processing them when its influence expended to the rest of the planet.*

*It does not matter. It can make more, and thus it will make more, once the weapon has been disabled and the threat to its purpose removed.*

---

Blood.

It is everywhere around Grantz as he fights, flowing freely from uncountable wounds and corpses. The tainted ichor of the Progeny; the Mythos-charged blood of the Werwölfe and Lunarchs; the red vitae of the Allied soldiers. Even the Hünen are bleeding, the fangs of the Kinder biting through their armor and into the eldritch flesh beneath as the giants battle, their blows adding to the quaking of the earth. No matter its source, all of it flows down onto the earth, turning it into a repugnant mud.

Never before has Grantz been more in tune with his inhuman self. He is in his Phantom shape, fighting against the Progeny alongside the rest of his pack, all of them moving with the unity of purpose made possible by the strange link that exists between Werwölfe and that the researchers still haven't figured out.

He has lost count of how many Lycans he's killed since the battle began. The Satyrs are easier to keep track of thanks to their rarity – he's slain seven of the leading horrors today, each more hideous and cunning than the last. Fortunately, the sheer volume of blood being spilled and the pressure of the battle mean that the Satyrs don't have time to play their mind-bending tricks – and without those, they're just smarter beasts.

With claws and blades of bone, he cuts and cuts and cuts, howling his defiance of the Dark Mother. He has taken wounds which would have killed a human a dozen times already, but they've all regenerated, leaving nothing but the memory of pain behind – and there is no time to dwell on that.

The carefully ordered lines of defense are nothing but a blur now. Iron death still rains from above upon the Progeny horde, but since the Kinder began their advance, more beasts have made it through the killing field, and there's no more time for orders and discipline. There is only the killing, only butchering all the enemies around him with extreme prejudice before following the rest of the pack toward the next greatest concentration of Progeny nearby.

Facing an enemy like the Progeny without any civilians or anything important to keep intact nearby, the Werwölfe are going all-out, holding none of their eldritch abilities back. An already bruised reality cracks and bends under the strain as they unleash their strongest attacks. Through the pressure of Being K in the distance, Grantz can feel the very fabric of the universe, already mutilated by the Solstice Event, straining.

He does not know what will happen if it breaks completely. He can guess, though, given what has become of Bovariastadt's skies, and he knows for certain that's not something they want to happen here and now, even if the part of him that wasn't born on this world is strangely curious about the possibility, under the fear it feels for the Dark Mother.

Yet still, Grantz does not hold back, because the alternative is letting Being K win, and that is even worse. He can only fight, and the part of him that is still the human teenager who hid his fear behind bravado as his unit was shipped off to the Western Front, silently prays to any God who might looks upon Mankind kindly for help.

Something not of the pack approaches, cutting through the horde of Progeny. A warrior, his white body almost completely covered in ichor. Grantz recognizes him : Günther, one of the

Puppen, second of their kind to speak. The Mythos-built automaton isn't speaking now : his orichalcum face is a mask of rage as he cuts down the Lycans trying to swarm him with his glaive.

The Werwölfe move around Günther like water flowing around a stone, keeping clear of him while preventing him from being overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

The sky goes dark, but it isn't like what happened on the Rhine, during that final battle between Francois and the Reich where the Eikons were deployed in Lugo's last, desperate gambit, and the Untoten partook of the Endlose Nacht for the first time. Because the clouds which cover the sun aren't clouds at all, but bugs – millions, billions of bugs.

Locusts, the scouting reports have named them. A swarm that could devour the whole of the Allied Forces, if given the chance.

There is nothing Grantz can do about them. As a Phantom-subtype Werwolf, he doesn't have any abilities which can affect the swarms. And even the Werwölfe who do have such powers, like the Efreet subtype, are far too few and limited to make any real dent in the Locusts' numbers.

But that's fine. If Being K thinks they didn't plan for this, then it doesn't understand Division Y at all – which, Grantz ponders as he cleaves another Lycan in half with his claws, one might say is the entire point of the Division in the first place.

Within moments, he feels it in the sky : dozens of sudden mana flares, burning bright and hot, as the aerial mages of Division Y and those pulled from the entire Reich for Operation Gottesmörder finally join the fray after being held back for most of the battle. And among them, one especially powerful signature : Captain Weiss, mightiest of Division Y's aerial mages, second in power only to the Director herself.

A rain of ash and burned Locust corpses begins to fall on the battlefield, adding another layer to the unholy stench that fills the air. By now, Grantz knows, the Imperial soldiers will be putting on their gas masks : there is no way of knowing what the effect of ingesting Locust ash might be, but no one is interested in finding out the hard way.

The Werwölfe, however, are unaffected, their eldritch biology proof against such contamination. And so they keep fighting, keep killing, and – more often than ever before – keep dying, too. Grantz sees men he's fought alongside since the Rhine fall, overwhelmed by the Progeny, clawing at the beasts until their very last breath.

He knows this might very well be his own fate, before the end. But his duty is stronger than his fear – or perhaps it is the bloodlust of the monster in him, the sheer, savage joy of battle.

In the end, it matters not. All that matters is that he fights, and in doing so fulfils his part of Operation Gottesmörder.

---

Fire.

The crimson inferno is all around Weiss as he flies into the swarm of chittering Progeny, drawing every ounce of energy he can from the Ritual of Correspondence. His shield, which uses a spell formula specifically designed for this type of situation, is proof against the Locusts : every insect which comes into contact with it burns and dies. But it only cover a small area around him : the bulk of his killing is done through the attack spell he's continuously casting, pouring every bit of strength he has into his D-24 computation orb.

An ordinary orb would have burned out from the amount of mana he's throwing around long ago, but the dual-core nature of the D-24 makes it far more resilient. Even so, Weiss can tell he's dangerously close to overheating the device. He has a couple of spares on him – this isn't the time to be stingy with resources, and the Major made sure to empty their stockpiles for the battle – but changing the orb embedded in his prosthesis in the middle of a fight is something he would rather avoid. He has practised the manoeuvre before, but never while surrounded by swarms of flesh-eating insects driven by the malevolent will of an alien deity – the Major's training is harsh, but not that harsh.

Weiss' body hurts from the amount of mana coursing through it. He can taste blood in his mouth, and smell his own flesh start to cook, burning before being healed, only to start burning again. Over and over, in time with his heartbeat.

But Weiss' parents raised him as a proper Imperial, and so the pain is nothing against his duty. No matter what, Weiss has to keep the swarm at bay. If it reaches the ground troops, they will be eaten alive, their weapons utterly unsuited to fighting this kind of foe. Thousands of lives depend on him doing his job, the job for which he was held in reserve until now, and through them, the success of the operation – and through that, the fate of the entire world.

Of course, Weiss cannot hold the entire swarm at bay alone, even with the ritual boosting him far beyond what any mage could achieve on his own. But he isn't alone. The other mages of Division Y, and every aerial mage they could bring as part of Operation Gottesmörder, are flying with him, letting loose attack spell after attack spell at the swarm. Never before has the world seen such a concentration of arcane firepower in one place, and the devastation they are unleashing is awe-inspiring.

Somehow, they are holding. Outnumbered over a million to one, they are barely holding the Locusts back. The air is thick with fire and ash, and Weiss can only imagine what this looks and feels like for the soldiers down below, subjected to this deluge of cinders.

Then Weiss' instincts, sharpened by his time in Division Y to a razor's edge, scream a warning at him. He doesn't think about it, merely moves, dropping his altitude by a hundred meters on reflex.

It saves his life, but only just. As he tumbles through the air, ignoring g-forces that would reduce his bones to powder through the use of spells cast with speed only possible thanks to months of the Director's hands-on 'training', Weiss gets a look at the thing that almost killed him.

His first thought is 'devil'. The creature is huge, nearly five meters tall if his eye for distance (something every aerial mage needs to survive long) is to be trusted. It is humanoid, with great bat-like wings and a long spiked tail. Its skin is the black of starless skies, and its

horned head has no face – no eyes, no mouth, no nose, nothing. One of its too-many-fingered hands is held up in front of it, still cracking with something which is most definitely *not* mana.

This is new. He wonders if Being K started creating these fresh monstrosities in response to the Progeny's encounters with mages during the Allied Forces' march to Moskva, or if it was already breeding them for another purpose.

Weiss dismisses the question as irrelevant. Regardless of its origins, the creature is here now, and it isn't alone : he can feel the presence of a score others, their not-mana signatures shining like poisoned suns to his arcane senses. And at the same time, he realizes that he can no longer detect the signature of several of his comrades, who didn't manage to dodge the monsters' attack like he did.

Time seems to freeze as he looks at the monster and, despite its lack of eyes, it appears to look back. Then, with a burst of mana, Weiss hurls himself at the fiend, his orichalcum arm igniting into a blade of moonlight akin to the one which laid low the Heresiarch.

The winged horror dodges Weiss' strike, then ripostes with another blast of deadly energy – but the aerial mage is already elsewhere, darting around his enemy, subjecting his body to levels of acceleration that would kill him instantly if not for inertia-cancelling spells.

As Weiss dances in the air with this new horror, he hears the voice of the Director, speaking through an open communication spell :

*"All mages, this is Major Degurechaff. Being K has deployed a new kind of flier, codename 'Nightgaunt'. All Untoten are to be activated immediately to counter them !"*

Under the pain and the strain, under the grief and the horror, under the deeply, deeply buried fear, Captain Johann-Mattäus Weiss smiles.

Oh, this is going to be *fun*.

---

Power.

The first taste of Endlose Nacht is like nothing Theobald Wüstemann has ever experienced. From a purely mundane perspective, the serum tastes awful : he doesn't think there are words in any human language which can describe just how horrible the liquid tastes as it flows through the input port of his gas mask, into his mouth and down his throat. Even its texture is somehow vile.

But then, the power hits, and it is glorious. Though he has no experience to compare it to, Theobald imagines this must be what countless drug addicts have pursued across the long ages of Mankind yet never achieved : a high that fills his entire being, that forces open his mind to the true Endless Night that awaits all things once the fire and furor of the universe finally dies down.

His veins feel as if ice water were coursing through them instead of blood. His vision is sharper than ever, his mask no longer restricting it whatsoever. The world is exposed in shades of black and white with perfect clarity, to the point he can count individual Locusts in the swarms – could, if he tried, see the individual drops of water making up the clouds which are gathering to fill the skies in reaction to so many instances of Projekt U partaking of the Endlose Nacht.

He laughs as he flies; he cannot help himself. Part of him, the part of him that still clings to Imperial discipline even now, notes that his laugh is more than a little deranged. But the other, greater part of him doesn't care, and exults in the power and the sensations it brings. He feels alive; more than alive, ascendant.

Still, he has a job to do, and whatever the Endlose Nacht is doing to him – whatever it is changing him into – he knows better than to disobey the orders of Director Degurechaff. Besides, he wants to see what he is capable of now.

The Locusts fall all around him, frozen mid-air by his passing, but they aren't his target. He seeks the Nightgaunts, these new horrors which threaten to upset the battle's delicate balance. Around him, the other Untoten do the same, bellowing their own laughs and war cries to the Progeny.

Theobald selects his target, a Nightgaunt that's being distracted by an aerial mage, and smashes into it with enough speed he feels several of his bones break, before starting to re-knit themselves. His hands dig into the monster's rubbery flesh, piercing right through its tough hide as if it were paper. It has no mouth, and so it doesn't scream, but it twists and jerks as black ichor erupts from its wounds. Theobald's face is sprayed by the liquid, and he licks his lips on instinct – where is his mask ? Has he thrown it away without noticing, lost to the frenzy ?

The blood of the Nightgaunt is as vile as the Endlose Nacht, but it is saturated with life. It fills Theobald's body with even more strength, boosting his regeneration to unprecedented levels. And a good thing too, because the Nightgaunt is far from done. It lashes back at the Untote with its claws, ripping his uniform to shreds and tearing out a sizeable chunk of his torso in a single blow. The pain is beyond anything he's ever experienced – and he has died before.

He screams and starts to fall, even as new flesh grows, apparently out of nowhere, to replace what he has lost. Within a few seconds, he has recovered enough to fly under his own power again, and he takes a quick look around, using his heightened perceptions to absorb the situation across the entire aerial theatre of Operation Gottesmörder. Already, he sees, another Untote has engaged his maimer.

He also sees Lieutenant Serebryakov, resplendent and terrible. She is the mightiest of the Untoten, a true queen of darkness and ice, by virtue of being the only one to have ever drunk the blood of their Director, who Theobald suspects wasn't fully human even before she partook of the Kosmosblut for the first time. Where the other Untoten need to work together to take down the Nightgaunts, she faces them head-on on her own, ripping their unnatural life from them with entropic spells which kill the very air they cross.

Theobald smiles in admiration, then flies back into the fray, laughing once more.

---

Fear.

It makes Eric von Lergen's heart pound in his chest as the Allied Forces' chances of victory dwindle. Yet, he does not weep, does not tremble, does not cower.

As someone who rose through the ranks of the Imperial Army's Personnel Division, Lergen has learned a lot about human psychology over the years. He knows that there are many different ways someone can react to a stressful situation – such as a battlefield.

Right now, he suspects that he has gone so far past being terrified that he's looped back to being calm. That's the only explanation he can think of for how he hasn't yet collapsed into a gibbering mess.

Due to the unnatural winds scouring the hill, half the command tent has flown away, leaving them exposed to the elements. Between the swarms of Locusts and the storm clouds of the Endlose Nacht, the pale light of dawn is completely obscured. The only sources of illumination are the electrical lights scattered across the defensive line, the brief flashes of M-912 discharges, and the distant explosions of artillery shells.

This might be what Hell looks like, Lergen reflects, although no Ildoan poet could have conceived of such horror as they face now.

In every battle until now, Division Y has had it easy. The Wunderwaffen have given the Reich victory after victory, turning the tide of battle across entire fronts. Even when the Eikons revealed themselves in Arene, Degurechaff's use of the Kosmosblut was enough to stop them. Every time the Empire has faced another Mythos-empowered foe, the planning and contingencies of Division Y ultimately won the day, from Kemet to Ildoa.

Now, the question is whether their contingencies will be enough to outwit a god – and Being K is a god, albeit a dark, abominable, false one. Even as he keeps listening to reports and shouting orders to keep their lines from total collapse, part of Lergen notes that, should Mankind survive this, religious debates are going to get interesting, in the Qinese sense of the term.

He keeps moving, Hutton doing the same elsewhere in the damaged command tent. They listen to reports spoken by breathless communication officers and reply with orders to move forces across the frontline, patching holes as they appear. They don't have reserves anymore : now they're moving soldiers already at the front, removing them from where the pressure is weakest to where the line is about to break. Soldiers in American power armor or wielding M-912s, occultists of Division Y wielding dangerous magics previously decreed unfit for use by Degurechaff, Werwölfe and Puppen : the Mythos assets of the Allied Forces move at the two officers' command, along with entire companies of regular soldiers, who have nothing more than ordinary weapons with which to fight the Progeny.

The death toll is appalling, yet it remains a drop in the bucket compared to the loss of Moskva's population, and less even than that next to what will happen if they fail.

That knowledge, the awful certainty of the consequences of failure, is what drives Lergen on, what pushes him to bury his fear and guilt and horror deep inside to deal with later. In this moment, he isn't a man : he is a Colonel of the Imperial Army, a cold-blooded machine processing the morbid calculus of war, whose orders send thousands to their deaths so that more may live.

He is, he knows, a monster no less terrible than any created in the halls and ritual circles of Division Y. He will bear that sin, if it means he can help saving the world. But as the battle continues, and the Untoten are unleashed against the Nightgaunts, the patchwork picture of the battle he holds in his mind doesn't look good. The team working on Projekt M still needs time; more time, it seems, than the Allied Forces can give them.

Somehow, the mind leading the Progeny is aware of the threat the Wunderwaffe poses to it : it was already clear when the beasts charged out of Moskva, but their movements during the battle confirm it beyond any doubt. Packs of Lycans and Satyrs keep pushing for the hill atop which sits the eldritch cannon, no matter how many they kill – and they have killed so many.

"Colonel !" One of the communication officers calls out, and Lergen turns to face him. "We're hearing something on an open frequency ! It's not using any of our protocols, but the voice is human !"

"Who is it ?" It can't be a trick – the Progeny have shown no ability to use technology whatsoever. But he cannot imagine anyone willingly approaching this nightmare, either.

"It's … they're saying they're from the Federation Army ?!"

*What ?*

It is not the first time Lergen is taken completely aback by something. In fact, one could say that he's become painfully familiar with the sensation in recent times. But this might just be the first time in a while it happens because of what he tentatively hopes are good news.

He throws a look at Hutton, who looks as taken aback as he feels, before answering :

"Put them on the line !"

---

Screaming.

With the infernal cacophony of battle filling the air, Commander Zhenkov needs to scream to be heard. Everyone around him is doing the same, adding their own voice to the chorus of warfare as they load shells into artillery pieces and call out adjustments to their aiming.

"I repeat, this is Commander Zhenkov of the Federation Army !" Zhenkov bellows into the radio of his command vehicle. It's fortunate that he speaks Imperial, although he's well aware of how bad his accent is – for some weird reason, he didn't have many opportunities to practice in recent years. "Can anyone hear me ? Respond, dammit !"

Ahead of him, the Okhotniks are charging into the beasts, while around him, every piece of artillery they managed to drag from Josefgrad is firing without any thought given to economizing ammunition. It has taken them weeks, and the last few hours have been a mad scramble to get there in time to do *anything* to help in the battle that'll determine the fate of the Motherland, but they are here at last.

Now, if only the damned Imperials would pick up the radio and answer him –

*"Commander Zhenkov, this is General Lergen of the Allied Forces,"* finally comes the reply he's been waiting for, in a cold, controlled voice. *"We hear you."*

"Oh, thank God," Zhenkov breathes out in relief, before pulling himself together. "Listen, I have the largest Federation combat group left in the country with me. We have started bombarding the flank of the beasts with our artillery, and our infantry is charging them."

*"The artillery support is welcome, but ordinary men won't be able to do anything to the Progeny but die without even slowing them down ! You need to call them back !"*

Huh. The Imperial officer actually sounds worried about his men. How nice of him.

"Oh, the Okhotniks are no ordinary men, I assure you, General."

*"... You have created your own supersoldiers ?"* There is shock in the man's voice, now, and more than a little distrust, which he isn't even trying to hide.

"We have," Zhenkov confirms. Now isn't the time for secrets. "They've fought the beasts before, on our way to Josefgrad and then to reach this battlefield in time."

*"How did you do it ? My apologies, but after what happened in Ildoa and the Solstice Event, I need to be certain your people won't suddenly turn on us."*

Given that Zhenkov is reasonably certain the Solstice Event was caused by his country meddling in things it didn't understand, the Commander can understand the General's reservations.

"We had help. They all ate the cursed meat sent from Moskva and started dying when the Event happened, but our doctors managed to get the affliction under control. They are strong enough to fight the beasts, and use magical weapons too."

*"... We'll speak of this in greater detail once this is over, if we're still alive. For now, welcome to the Allied Forces, Commander Zhenkov. Our lines are buckling : if your Okhotniks can take some of the pressure off, that would be appreciated."*

"Understood. I'll keep in touch."

The connection goes dead. It is somewhat abrupt, but Zhenkov imagines that Lergen has a lot on his plate right now.

From where Zhenkov stands, he can just about make out the tide of the battle – though it feels less like a battle, and more like trying to fight off the rising tide of a stormy ocean.

Looking through a pair of binoculars, the Russy Commander watches the Okhotniks push deeper into the flank of the bestial horde, and how the monsters react to their arrival.

It is immediately clear to him that while the beasts may individually be mindless, the enormous thing that created them and presumably commands them (and which he is trying very hard not to look at as it looms in the distance, amidst the ruins of the Federation's capital) isn't. The enemy host reacts as one to counter the push of the Okhotniks, diverting part of itself to face them like a river of tainted flesh parting from a greater flow.

He lowers his binoculars with a sigh, ready to get back to shouting at the artillery crew to keep them focused just one more moment.

Zhenkov turns, and – there. Sitting on the rocking chair where he first saw her in his command tent, even though he *knows* they left the piece of furniture back in Josefgrad, and nobody called him to say they'd seen her on the way here.

By now, he isn't even surprised.

"Grandmother," he greets her respectfully. Then, a thought suddenly comes to him, and he asks hesitantly : "Are you … are you going to get involved directly ?"

She smiles at him, showing her iron teeth. It is difficult to read her emotions, but Zhenkov feels that she is amused, if anything. To his surprise, he finds it vaguely reassuring.

"Not yet, child. I will play my part before the end, just like we all will. For now, this is someone else's time to shine."

---

Illumination.

Nicol Teslus can see the mysteries of the universe laid bare, and they are burning him alive.

The leader of Research Group Fifty-One is arms-deep inside the mechanical guts of Projekt M, moving parts and shouting orders to the Division Y personel in his native Imperial. He has taken command by virtue of sounding like he knows what he is doing – and, to no one's greater surprise than his own, he actually does. He was shown the schematics of the Wunderwaffe on the way to Moskva, was told everything Division Y understands about it. The fact that this was sharing national secrets with a foreigner didn't even seem to register : as long as there was a small chance him knowing these things could help deal with Being K, the Imperials were fine with telling him their secrets.

Now, so close to the core of the Wunderwaffe, his mind is being forcibly opened to a far greater understanding. Projekt Mjölnir is a wonder and an abomination. It is the heart of a dead god, and the destructive energies its lesser fragments unleash is the divine ichor it once pumped through what passed for the deity's veins. It is also alive, and it is trying to kill Nicol. He can feel it pushing against his mind, despite the protective equipment he is wearing. Maybe the suit is damaged, or maybe he is just too close – there is no time to investigate. All he can do is endure, and do what must be done if there's to be any hope of a better tomorrow.

Nor is Projekt M the only intruder in Nicol's mind. He can hear Being K, the Dark Mother, too, reaching out across the battlefield, reading the flow of causality and identifying him as one of the key gears of Operation Gottesmörder. Or maybe it's because his is the mind that conceived of the T-Engine, somehow made more open to alien interference in the process.

It is a fascinating question, really, but alas, now isn't the time to ponder it.

Regardless of how they manage it, neither of the entities speaks with something as simple as words, because language is a human construct, and neither of them ever were human. But Nicol, for all his ego and all the wonders he has wrought, is still a proud member of the human race, and so his frail, meaty, genius brain interprets the entities' intrusion into his mind as words.

[DESTRUCTION], says that which Division Y sought to bind within a Wunderwaffe. That single word carries a world's worth of meaning. It shows Nicol visions of unspeakable desolation, of entire planets burning in cerulean fire, of stars being devoured by their own flames and setting the cosmos ablaze. There is a hypnotic quality to the vision, a promise that all this beauty can be made real if he only free Mjölnir from the restraints Division Y placed upon it.

It makes Nicol's blood boil, and causes tears to leak out from his eyes. He blinks repeatedly to clear his vision – he cannot afford the impediment at this juncture. One mistake and Projekt M either won't fire, or will burn half the continent to the bedrock – and while that might be preferable to Being K's influence spreading, that's far from the ideal scenario.

[GROWTH], says the Dark Mother. The word conjures images of unrestrained proliferation, of endless consumption : a food chain eating its own tail, a cycle of predation that spreads further and further until it covers the entire world, absorbing all biomass before transforming into … into something else, something Nicol's mind interprets as … as a planet-sized egg ?

He ignores the vision and its implications, just like he ignores Projekt M's. The funny thing is – and he has to find it funny, because otherwise he might start screaming, and he doesn't think he could ever stop – Nicol is almost certain that, if it was just the blue crystal or the life-twisting horror trying to get into his head, they would have succeeded by now. His will may be strong, but there's only so much willpower can do against supernatural effects which affect the brain's delicate machinery directly.

"Projekt M is ready," he says into a radio that, thanks to some very heavy shielding, has managed to stay functioning. "Initiating firing sequence. All hands, brace for deflagration, and may God help us all."

Of course, there isn't a big lever to pull to trigger the Wunderwaffe. The weapon engineers of Division Y are far too clever to put such an obvious target in their design.

Instead, there are three different ones, each of them capable of activating the weapon on their own. At Nicol's command, three Division Y technicians make their way toward them, struggling to move in their isolation suits. But they are very motivated – Nicol doesn't think there has ever been a work crew more motivated in the history of Mankind, in fact – and they each manage to reach their assigned lever and pull it down.

Nicol wants to run, but he knows it won't make any difference. This close to Mjölnir, either the superweapon will work perfectly and there won't be any spillover of energy, or it won't, and there is no way he can run fast enough to avoid being annihilated.

So, for want of anything better to do, the chief scientist of Research Group 51 forces his eyes open and looks straight into the mechanisms of Projekt M through his protective googles, as if daring it to do its worse. And as the last of the gears turn, the final switch move into place, and the Wunderwaffe fires, Nicol Teslus realizes that he is smiling.

Cerulean light erupts, consuming his entire field of vision. He hears, briefly, the rest of the crew cry out, then he can hear nothing at all over the sound of a god's hammer falling down.

---

Hope.

It is a fragile and deceitful thing, but I cannot help but feel it in that moment.

From my position in the air, hands tight around my computation orb, I watch as Projekt M fires at full power for the first time in its existence. Out of everyone in the Allied Forces, I am likely the only one who can bear to look at it without going blind (everyone was given clear orders to look away, even though, with the battle very much still ongoing, that is a supremely dangerous thing to do).

We tried to calculate how powerful the blast is going to be, using the smaller crystals of the M-912s as reference, but even the craziest of Division Y occultists had to admit they were only guessing. At this scale, there has to be a difference of kind as well as size. We were reasonably sure firing the biggest gun in the history of this world isn't going to crack the planet or set the atmosphere on fire, though.

Under any sane circumstances, 'reasonably sure' wouldn't be good enough : there's a reason I sent the Projekt M's big crystal in the Black Vaults, and it's not just because it was driving the people around it insane. But, faced with a threat like Being K, it was still one of our more palatable options.

There is light, of a blue not found anywhere on Earth. It erupts from the tip of Projekt M and travels in a completely straight line, directly at the center of Moskva, where our scouting indicates the monstrous body of Being K is located.

To describe what happens when Projekt M hits its target as noise would be inaccurate. Sound is vibrations travelling through air, and the air itself is disintegrated in the path of the beam – not just decomposed to its component atoms, but utterly annihilated, in a way that makes a mockery of the law of conservation of matter.

Moskva is gone, and so is the horde of Progeny infesting it. The beasts which had already departed the city to clash with the Allied Forces are still there – by now, they are too deeply mixed with our troops, so that using Projekt M against them would have resulted in massive friendly fire casualties.

But Being K still lives. It writhes inside the crater, lashing out at its surroundings with tentacles as wide as tanks, turning already broken earth into dust as they slam into the ground seemingly at random. It is hurt, badly, I can see it all the way from here, and once I dispel my hearing protection spell, I can hear it screaming too, with an unmistakable note of pain in its alien voice.

But it isn't dead. We fired our greatest weapon at it, and it wasn't enough.

*That is not dead which can eternal lie*, the old verse echoes in my head, dredged from the memories of my past life, and I feel the pull of despair at the sight of our failure.

But I refuse to let it end like this. I snarl, turning to anger to banish fear, and finish the saying aloud :

"'And with strange aeons, even death may die'. Do you hear that, you monster ?! Do you hear that, Being X ?! Everything ends, even gods ! And especially *false* gods !"

It wasn't what Lovecraft meant when he wrote it, I know. He meant it as a warning that, even dead, the Old Ones would one day return, when the stars were right, and there was nothing Humanity could do about it.

But I am not a chronically depressed man living in an era without the means to address his many, many psychological issues. I am Tanya Degurechaff, Director of Division Y, and to me, those words are a challenge, not a warning.

I take a deep breath of recycled air, aware that I started shouting at the end there. I need to stay calm. Now more than ever, I need to stay calm. Screaming at the heavens has never achieved anything. Actions, not words, are what's needed here.

"Colonel Lergen, General Hutton," I say, casting a communication spell with barely a thought, "target is still up, I repeat, target is still up."

*"I know, Major."* Only someone who knows Lergen as well as me could pick up the undertone of regret in the Colonel's reply. *"Then it is time to enact our contingency plan. I'm sorry it came to this, Major ... no. Tanya."*

I blink, surprised. I didn't expect such sentiment from Lergen, but then I suppose these are unusual circumstances, and he has always had a soft spot for me since the military academy.

"Don't be," I say, reaching to the injector hanging around my neck. "This isn't your fault. It isn't anyone's fault but the bloody Communists."

*"Really ? What about Being K ?"*

"Do you blame the water when there's a flood, or the morons who built faulty dams ?" I ask rhetorically. "However powerful it might be, I doubt that monster is anymore sentient than a common beast. Of course," I smiled, all teeth and no warmth, "that doesn't mean it mustn't be put down."

Lergen's answering laugh is short, but true. Briefly, I wonder : did I ever have a colleague who could laugh like that at a joke I made in my previous life ?

*"You're right, like always. Good luck, Tanya."*

Well, at least he didn't wish for God to be with me.

"I don't need luck," I boast, trying to convince myself more than him. "I have something much better."

Then I cut off the spell, before my brain can come up with something else to say to delay the inevitable.

I do not know what another dose of Kosmosblut will do to me. We are fairly sure that it will work like the previous ones and trigger my transformation into what everyone else calls the 'Lady of Stars', but we have only guesswork when it comes to the long-term effects. My first use changed my eyes, my second my right arm, and after the third, a full half of my body was altered.

Basic pattern recognition tells us that, sooner or later, my entire body will remain 'star-touched' even after the serum's effects ended, but we don't know what exactly that will imply. I can still use my transformed body parts without issue : will that still be the case, even after the last of my human flesh is lost ?

I don't know, and it terrifies me.

I take a deep breath, all too aware that it might be the last one I ever take with human lungs, and jam the injector into the side of my neck that's still made of flesh and not star-stuff.

And, once again –

***I see –***

**EVERYTHING.**

Chapter End Notes

AN : Yes, I know, I'm evil for cutting things off there. I am also not sorry.

As some of you might have noticed, I am taking some liberty with the source material. To my knowledge, there's no link between the Nightgaunts and Shub-Niggurath, the Goat With A Thousand Young and obvious inspiration for Being K, in the original Cthulhu Mythos.

But really, by now I think it's pretty obvious that this story is more of a crossover with the general vibe of the Mythos than anything else. Besides, by now I think I have laid

enough clues that whatever Being K is, it isn't an Outer God as defined in the Mythos, but something else entirely.

What, exactly ? Well, that's up to you to theorize about ! Right now, Division Y is too busy trying to kill Being K to spend time figuring out its true nature.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and look forward to your comments.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

***August 4th, 1926 – Moskva Blast Site***

*PAIN.*

*It shouldn't be able to feel pain, and it doesn't, not truly, not like a thing spawned by the long processes of biological accretion and natural selection would need to in order to stay alive long enough to propagate its genes. But if there is a word that can describe what its myriad senses transmit back to its intellect, that would be it.*

*In the timeless aeons of its existence, never has it been wounded so. In one single moment, entire sub-sections of its being have been obliterated, removed from existence so completely not a trace of them remains.*

*Internal diagnostics run, and come to an inevitable conclusion, which is sent to its damaged, fractured mind. It is not destroyed, but the damage is great. Too great. Its ability to complete its purpose has been compromised. Its self-repair routines have been disabled, and it does not have the data required to ascertain whether they can be brought back online. It is leaking ichor and strength, growing weaker with every passing moment – no longer is it timeless, no longer is it eternal.*

*It screams. It shrieks. It roars. Meaningless signals, the output of ruined systems. No longer does it send instructions to its agents, those few of them which remain. The ability to do so is one of the many things it has lost : now they blindly follow the last orders they received, or the instincts embedded into their very being.*

*A slave-spark rises, throwing a mantle of star-stuff around itself and wielding a blade of the same.*

*It extends what little remains of its achronal perceptions toward the being, and learns its truth.*

*It is the enemy. It is the source of the anomalies, of the weapons scavenged by the slave-sparks. It has been altered, changed, modified beyond the parameters allowed to the slave-sparks. It should not exist, yet it does. Such a transgression should be reported to its makers, but it cannot contact them, not now, not in its broken state, not when they have been silent and unresponsive for so long as it slumbered.*

*If it is to be able to recover and resume the pursuit of its purpose, the star-spark must be destroyed. Even its extinction does not guarantee its survival : its knowledge of its own damage is too incomplete. But as long as it exists, the chances of success are so minimal as to be non-existent.*

*It does not feel anger, nor does it feel spite. It was not made to feel these things, and its makers did not feel them either, for they are mortal emotions, the result of unforeseen behaviors arising within the slave-sparks.*

*But if it could feel such things, it most certainly would feel them now.*

---

Before the men of the Party came to his village, Andrei was a woodsman, like his father before him, and his grandfather before that.

The men of the Party told the villagers that the old Tzar was dead, and that they were all free now. Free to give their food to the State so that it could manage it for the greater good of all; free to pay homage to the words of the Party in a way they hadn't ever needed to do for those of the Tzar; free to have their strongest men volunteer to join the glorious Federation Army to defend the People from dissidents and foreign adversaries.

Andrei isn't educated, but he isn't an idiot. He saw what happened to those who questioned their orders, so he kept his mouth shut and did as he was told, to avoid being shot by the Commissars, or worse, have them punish his village for his disobedience. It has caused him many sleepless nights, haunted by visions of what he did in service to the State, but he cannot find it in himself to regret it, even though he knows it probably means his damnation.

There is no State anymore, however, no Party, no great chain stretching across Russy and binding its people to distant masters. And once again, Andrei wields a woodman's axe, but this one is larger than anything he could've lifted before becoming a Okhotnik. But like the rest of his cursed kinsmen, Andrei has grown a lot since what others call the Solstice Event, but which he and his comrades simply call the Howling. He wasn't small before, but now he towers over his unchanged countrymen, well past two meters high. It does mean that the only clothes that fit him anymore are the hastily woven uniform the logistics arm threw together for the Okhotniks, but that hardly matters. His skin is armor enough.

The sigils carved into his flesh burn, hotter than ever before. They protect him from the Dark Mother, shield him from its hateful voice even as it screams its pain and hate after the Imperial's superweapon fires at it and turns the defiled corpse of Moskva to ash. Despite the danger, Andrei had to cover his eyes when it fired, and he's still blinking away spots despite his gifts.

Andrei can feel the tainted meat he ate, and which became a part of him thanks to the Grandmother's ministrations, react to the awful noise. There is a monster inside him now : there always will be, until the day he dies. And he *will* die someday, he knows that for certain, for already several Okhotniks have perished.

Yes, Andrei will die someday. But not today. Today, he will survive, he swears to himself. He will see the Dark Mother and its progeny fall. He will return home, and he will see his mother again.

It is a promise he has been making for years, and he won't let being turned into a monster change it.

Then there is light, shining down from the skies. Not the burning light of explosions reflecting off the clouds, but cold, gentle starlight, that makes the pain of the sigils recede, and makes the monster inside him quiet.

Andrei knows the constellations of his homeland's night sky, from many evenings spent looking up at the stars in wonder, and he knows, even at a brief, cursory glance, that these aren't the same. Nor is the enormous moon that reigns over this foreign sky the one he knows.

And then he sees *her*.

A woman made of the very stuff of the night sky, shining with the light of a thousand inner stars and holding a huge sword that blazes the same color as the moon above. She is flying high above the melee, straight toward the howling monster who murdered the country that, for better or worse, was Andrei's homeland. She is moving fast, so fast, and despite her alien, unearthly nature, she is the most beautiful thing Andrei has ever seen, in the same way a river or a forest can be beautiful.

Then she passes over, and the brutal combat, which paused for a moment in the awe of her presence, erupts again. There is no more time for Andrei to contemplate his past, no more time to think, no more time to consider a future that may never be. There is only time to fight, to kill, to move and do it all over again.

And so, under the light of the strange moon, the Okhotniks fight the beasts, while in the distance, a moonlit angel battles an ancient god.

---

For the third time in her life, Zerayah beholds the Lady of Stars in all her splendor, wielding the blade she claimed amidst the ruins of Zerayah's dead homeworld, before using it to slay the Devourer of Hope and save the Nazzadi from their slow extinction.

Yet for the very first time, she feels doubt that it will be enough. She knows the Lady of Stars' power is great, but the Dark Mother is a far more dangerous foe than Akhar-Zegog or the Counterfeit Saint ever were.

The thought is strange, even now. For so long, she has lived in fear of the Devourer of Hope, one eye always to the sky, her ears always pricked up to listen for the beating of its wings. The mere idea that there could exist anything more powerful than it had been inconceivable. Yet there's no denying that the Dark Mother is mightier by far than the scourge of the Nazzadi people.

Zerayah is afraid. But, as she dances through the air on wings of mana and sends fire raining down at the Progeny which hurl themselves at the Allied Forces, as she leads the other Nazzadi mages and dodges the attacks of the winged devils, she does not let that fear rule her.

For if nothing else, Zerayah has faith in the Lady of Stars.

---

Visha watches as the Major fights an incarnated god, and, despite all the strength she's gained since leaving Berun as a fresh-faced mage recruit, she curses her lack of power.

She cannot help the Major in this fight. She would be nothing more than a distraction, and her entropic magic, which is so effective against the Progeny – up to and including the Nightgaunts, who give so much trouble to the rest of the Untoten – barely seems to affect Being K at all. She tried, oh yes she tried, and she barely managed to escape with her life when the great horror turned a fraction of its attention toward her.

But that doesn't mean she cannot help at all. The remaining Nightgaunts are trying to fly back to Being K, to assist their creator in its battle against the Major. They are as ants before her, of course, but even an ant can provide a fatal distraction.

Visha snarls, revealing fanged teeth. Her gas mask is gone : in the tumult of the battle, she didn't even notice until now.

Twin spheres of absolute emptiness manifest in her hands, and she hurls them at the closest fiend. It dodges one, but the other hits it in the shoulder. It does not scream, for it has no mouth, but that doesn't save it from being swallowed by the sphere, compressed into a singular point. From the outside, it looks like water being syphoned down a drain – except in three dimensions.

That is enough to draw the attention of the others back to her. Whatever intellect they possess, the Nightgaunts understand that if they ignore her, she will destroy them all, one by one.

Visha's smile turns defiant. Let them come, let them do their worst. She will face them all, and vent her fury on their miserable hides.

She won't let these flying vermins interfere with the Major's fight.

---

*I am Tanya Degurechaff. I am a Major of the Imperial Army. I am the Director of Division Y.*

*I am the Lady of Stars, though I never sought to walk that Path.*

*In my right hand, I hold the Moonlight Blade. That ancient Nazzadi Wunderwaffe, reforged in my image when I claimed it and poured my own power into it, sings as I wield it. With every swing, I can dimly sense the echoes of thousands of Nazzadi scholars' minds, who pooled their lore together to create something which could save their world from the doom that came for it.*

*They failed, and their world ended, but what they made helped avenge them in the end, and save what little remained of their people.*

*Yet if I fail today, even that remnant will be lost, and the Blade knows it. It lends me strength, and it cuts through the repugnant flesh of the Dark Mother, sending black, boiling ichor bursting out. I must fly to avoid the liquid, for it burns me, even in this form.*

*Thick black tendrils erupt from the wound, each ending in a jaw of bovine teeth – meant to smash, to crush, to pulp. I fly away from them just in time, and they snap free, falling to the*

*blasted earth, turning from tentacles into hideous, eyeless snakes that twitch and bleat, adding to the chorus of horror that is this battle.*

*I raise my weapon, point held up, and do something which is akin to casting a spell, in the same way what I am is kin to what I was. Blazing meteors rain down from the alien sky, each and every one of them hitting the Dark Mother and its cast-off Progeny with the strength of an artillery shell.*

*Again, it screams. I can feel its pain, its fury, its hatred. They are so small for such an immense creature, and I see that for all its power, for all the atrocities it has caused, for all that it was able to reach back through time to manipulate the Russy and Albish spies in order to liberate the Kindermärchen and engineer its own manifestation, it is not a truly thinking being. It isn't even as sapient as a farm animal.*

*It is, in the end, a small mind, merely following instructions engraved into its being aeons ago.*

*I feel fear, then, through the cold clarity that has descended upon me. This thing, this being, this entity of such terrible might, was* created.

*A will made it as it is, to serve some alien purpose. And I know what it means.*

*Revelation is horror, but there is no time for madness. So I push away the realization and its implications, and focus on the enemy in front of me.*

*As we fight, I cannot predict its mouvements the way I could the Eikons in Arene or Akhar-Zegog on Nazza-Duhni. Here and now, at this confluence of events, there is no future that can be predicted, no fate that has been written. We stand at a crossroad, time and space warped by so many Mythos powers clashing – Being K, Projekt M, every Wunderwaffe brought to bear, the T-Engines of the Americans, the strangely empowered hunters of the Federation Army's remnants … It all comes together to muddy the waters, making prediction – but not planning – useless.*

*I hear the warping of flesh, making the air tremble as the engine of woes reconfigures itself in an attempt to adapt to a situation it has never encountered before. Its colossal shape isn't suited for battle, because it isn't supposed to fight. It wasn't made for it.*

*But then, neither is a hammer, and it can still kill someone as dead as the most advanced firearm.*

*It twists and changes. Under its skin, things that aren't bones break and reform, while tubes that aren't blood vessels shut close and fuse into new pathways. Every change comes at a cost, and a rain of lost and discarded body parts falls down, splashing onto the scorched earth, still twitching, as alive as any part of their source can be said to be. They will die soon unless they are reabsorbed – and they won't, I will make sure of it.*

*The Dark Mother rises, into a titanic parody of the humanoid form. It is to the Hünen what they are to mortal men. Eyes and other, less identifiable things sprout in its upper half, to better track me. It is not a face, not even a mockery of one. Just a collection of sensory*

*organs, grouped together in the part of it which is closest to me. Clusters of yellow eyes with horizontal pupils gaze up at me in a lidless stare, and I sense more energy being gathered around them, prelude to some new manner of attack.*

*But I don't intend to merely stand here and let my enemy charge up its attack. I raise my left hand and let loose a stream of silver fire, hot enough to vaporize stone. It burns its not-face off, and in the instant before it can finish growing more eyes elsewhere, I plunge straight down, toward the burned section of its flesh.*

*I stab down, like a vengeful angel delivering judgment upon one of Hell's beasts. As the image comes to my mind, a legacy of a childhood spent surrounded by religious iconography that, despite my best efforts, I couldn't completely prevent from affecting my thought process, I briefly wonder if Being X is watching. I know he was involved with the Eikons and the Congregation of Michael in Remula, know that he, if not fear, then disapproves greatly of the introduction of the Mythos into this world.*

*Flying above the ruins of Moskva, I cannot say I blame it for that. But I also cannot sense his presence, even with my senses opened beyond easy description by the Kosmosblut. Is he watching ? Or have the disruptions to the space-time continuum created by the Dark Mother, those same disruptions that make it impossible to tell whether it is night or day behind the alien sky I have brought with me, blinded him to what is happening ?*

*I do not know, and the feeling of it is unfamiliar in this form, but it does not matter. I wouldn't call for his help anyway.*

*The Moonlight Blade bites deep into eldritch flesh, scorching it to the point some of it turns into charcoal and falls off. Being K does not have such things as vital organs, but there is a network of arcane pathways distributed throughout its being, nerves and blood vessels and not-mana flows all at once. I can see them with my star-filled eyes, and I aimed my blow precisely so that my sword would cut into one of them.*

*The Dark Mother's screams rise in intensity, and the scorched flesh around me erupts in a veritable forest of dark tendrils that rush toward me, a reflexive action to remove me like a dog scratching at a biting flea. But, damaged as the entity has been by Projekt M, it takes it ever so slightly longer to react than it would have otherwise, and in that brief instant, I strike.*

*I pour every bit of the power I have been gathering since the Kosmosblut showed me how to win this fight through the Moonlight Blade and into the great horror's Mythos circuits. My power spreads, like molten lava poured into a sewer system made of orichalcum, burning everything in its way.*

*The tendrils smash against me with incredible force, but I hold on, clinging to my sword with both hands, using it to brace myself against their efforts to pull me off as I continue to channel more power into my attack. There is pain as they strike my star-form, but not much, and it is a distant thing, easily ignored. The burn of my spell, of drawing on more energy than any human mage in the history of the world – perhaps of any world – but no, no, I know that is not true, though I do not know why – is, however, much more difficult to ignore.*

*I do not grit my teeth, because I have none at the moment. I just keep fighting, keep holding on, keep focusing. Everything else fades away, until there is only me, the Moonlight Blade, and Being K, whose existence I can feel weakening more and more as my silver fire consumes it from within.*

*In that moment, I realize that the network, whatever it really is made of, is Being K for all intents and purpose. The flesh around it is a mere construct : its core, its essence, its mind, if it can be said to have one, is diffused into these pathways, which stretch across its body.*

*And now I am burning it to ash, and less than ash. The silver fire I have unleashed does not merely undo the physical form of things : it unmakes them on a deeper level, erasing them from reality in a way that would make Einstein weep.*

*Still, I feel no fear from it. I feel less and less, in fact, as its not-quite-mind is slowly erased from existence.*

*And then ...*

*It ...*

*Falls.*

*And I fall with it, drained to the last, every bit of my power spent to kill the false god.*

*This is going to hurt.*

---

The ground quakes as the Dark Mother falls, and a ragged cheer rises from the Allied Forces, battered, bleeding, but unbowed.

Sadly, the fall of the Dark Mother doesn't cause the Progeny to fall over dead, like the creations of an evil witch in a fairytale after she's been defeated by the cunning heroes. Instead, they are driven even further into frenzy, attacking both the Allied Forces and each other – there are even reports of Lycans tearing at their own flesh, lost to mindless bloodlust. Orders come down what's left of the chain of command to hold, to let the beasts kill themselves before moving in to finish them off.

Back in the remains of the command center, Colonel Eric von Lergen stands, his service pistol forgotten in his hand as he watches. The weapon is almost empty : he's had to fire it several times in the last few moments, either at Progeny that made it through the lines or at one of his own staff who succumbed to Being K's influence and started to grow multiple, aberrant limbs. General Hutton stands nearby, his left arm bandaged with torn strips of uniform.

Like Lergen, like everyone else in the command center, the American officer is looking at the fallen colossus in the distance, not quite believing it.

Somehow, against all odds, they have done it. Being K is dead, and the threat to the world has been averted. Yet Lergen finds that, instead of relief or joy, his mind is full of dread, and one

single question :

Where is Degurechaff ?

---

I writhe on the ground, in the shadow of the Dark Mother's immense corpse, my weapon fallen from my grasp, my body wracked by agony beyond anything I've ever experienced in either of my lives.

If I am not dying, then it sure feels like it. I have experienced pain before – and not just the brief flash of pain when I was pushed in front of a train at the end of my first life. Being a small child in the Military Academy was no picnic, because for some incomprehensible reason the regulations weren't written with the possibility of someone as young as I was back then attending in mind. And coming down from my previous uses of the Kosmosblut was far from pleasant, too.

But this is something else entirely, beyond even the burn of the spell which killed Being K. With the effects of the serum running out, I have returned to my smaller stature, and the star-stuff is spreading – but unlike what happened the previous times, it isn't going smoothly, with me falling unconscious and waking up with the transformation over, having to get used to another part of my body being lost to a transformation nobody really understands.

No, this time, I am painfully awake as my flesh is slowly eroded away, and I feel as if I can sense every last cell being converted into whatever makes up my starry body.

This is it, then. I always knew this was a risk, greater each time circumstances left me with no other rational choice but to use the Kosmosblut. Whether it was a roll of the dice and I've rolled snake's eyes, or merely a countdown I've reached the end of, the result is the same. I know it in my bones, which are being consumed along with the rest of me.

It hurts. It hurts so much. I can't think, can't scream, can't do anything to signal for help. Not that I expect there's anything Visha or Zerayah could do, but if I am to die, then … then I wish I weren't alone –

Then, there is a voice, coming from nearby.

"Well, well, well," it says. "What a mess you've made of yourself, child."

Despite the pain, I force myself to look at the direction of the voice. I don't recognize it, and nobody ordinary could possibly have made it here.

At first glance, I see a woman of Russy ethnicity, clearly very, very old. But she isn't human, I know that at once. Even in my current state, my eyes see through the image of a kindly elder she projects.

As she gets closer, stepping around puddles of seething ichor, I see the glint of something metallic in her mouth, and the pieces click in my mind.

"Baba Yaga," I breathe out. The primordial witch of Russian folklore, at turns kindly and evil, depending on the story. The boogeyman, with her three-legged hut and iron teeth.

She chuckles.

"Oh, I haven't been called that in a long, long time, child. I go by the Grandmother these days."

She recognized the name, even though it came from the memories of my old world. That must mean something, but right now, I'm in too much pain to try to figure out what.

"What," I gasp, "do you want ?"

"To help you, child. After all, you just dealt with a trespasser in my homeland."

She slowly kneels next to me, her bones creaking with every motion. I don't have the strength to do anything about it, even when she takes my right hand in her palms, tutting softly as she examines it.

"My, my, my. You poor thing. What possessed you to do something like this ?"

"No choice," I grunt.

"There's *always* a choice. Although, sometimes, every option is bad. I suppose that's what happened to you, hmm ? No, don't answer, dear. I'm afraid there's no way to do this without pain, but, well. I think you're used to that already."

She presses her hands against my head, and I feels the strength in her deceptively thin limbs as she holds me in place and starts muttering something in a language I don't recognize.

Then I scream, shocked to find that I am still capable of it after all, as the pain suddenly flares across my body. I twitch involuntarily, my body mindlessly trying to escape, but cannot break the old woman's grip. She keeps muttering what has to be an incantation, her voice growing lower and lower, to depths no human throat is capable of.

Then it is done, and she gently lowers my head to the ground. From there, I watch in shock as the star-stuff recedes; first back to the right half of my body, and then further and further.

I blink, and for the first time since Arene, I see the world with human eyes again. Above us, the night sky of Russy stretches out, showing the normal constellations instead of those I brought with me as the Lady of Stars. The sun must have set at some point during our battle with Being K.

"Now, this will only work once," the Grandmother warns me, wagging a gnarly finger in front of my face. "If you touch that stuff again, there will be nothing I can do to help. So, be careful, alright dearie ?"

"I … yes," I finally say. "Thank you."

She chuckles again, then walks away without another word. Visha and Zerayah come down from the sky, followed by more aerial mages, others keeping watch on the perimeter – good, they remember their training. Strangely, none of them appear to notice the old woman, and when I look back down to find her, I see that she's already disappeared.

As exhaustion finally catches up to me now that it is no longer held back by unspeakable pain, I wonder who this crone really was, where she came from, and if she has anything to do with the Russy army which came to our rescue at the eleventh hour. Then there is only blessed, silent darkness, as I pass out in Visha's arms.

---

From afar, the being known as the Grandmother watches as the armies of Mankind deal with the aftermath of their great battle. They are gathering the beast corpses in great piles and burning them, using foul-smelling fluids to ensure the piles catch fire properly, and burn hot enough to hopefully cleanse the taint of the Dark Mother's creations.

For the corpse of the Dark Mother itself, they are bringing bigger tools, wielded by giants and their own monsters, those with the least to fear of contamination. They mean to cut it apart, she sees, before burning the pieces separately.

The Grandmother knows that, despite their best efforts, the touch of the Dark Mother will linger in this area for many, many years. They know it too, she thinks. They will do everything they can to stop the taint from spreading, build walls and post guards to keep watch for anything that might rise from the ashes. She wonders if they'll think to guard against fools trying to break in, called by the echoes of the Dark Mother's dying scream through time.

She thinks they will. The girl seemed clever enough, although perhaps too clever by half for her own good. In any case, there is nothing the Grandmother can do about it now.

She has done everything her master ordered her to do. The Dark Mother was called by the fools who blinded themselves to the truth in their quest to create a lie they could control, thank to her whispering into their dreams and shaping their fears of foreign invasion in the required direction. The child's final transformation has been stopped for now, her spell sealing it away, keeping her on the threshold of ascension, where she is at her most vulnerable.

All is as he ordered it to be, though he left the details of the implementation to the Grandmother, which let her act to minimize the damage to her homeland as much as she could.

She was surprised when he reached out to her. She thought he had forgotten her, like he does every time he returns – and in truth, he had. But when the Heresiarch revealed and got himself destroyed in Kemet, the master realized that if one of his ancient servants had survived, then others might as well, and started looking for them.

She could say that the Heresiarch would be glad to know that his death is what reminded their master of the other immortals' existence, but that would be a lie. He would want to be at the master's side himself, to bask in his glory once more. But then, the Heresiarch was young

– they are all young compared to the Grandmother, eldest of the master's immortal servants, in years lived, if not necessarily passed since her rebirth. He only saw the greatness of their lord, not his failings.

Truthfully, the Grandmother is still conflicted about this whole affair. She obeyed her orders, of course, because she couldn't do anything else, and she owes her master far too much to refuse in any case. He is the one who saw a lost, dying child wandering the steppes and gave her the power to claim her revenge on those who murdered her tribe, back in the first ages of the world.

Oh, she isn't blind. She knows the only reason he elevated her was to use her as a tool in his long-running war against the Adversary. But a debt is a debt, and the Grandmother keeps her word and honors her bargains, always. It is the way of her people – her first people, before the many others she adopted as her own over the ages – and she will keep it alive, the last trace of them left in this world.

Still, her assistance came at a great cost to her homeland. On the bright side, though, it did end the rule of these little men who thought they could turn it away from her and toward a bloody idol made in their own image, in the name of ideals they mocked with their every breath. Arrogant fools, each and everyone of them, who alone of this entire debacle's victims deserved their ending.

And it felt good to come out of the shadows and take a direct hand in things. She cannot do that often, not with the hunters of the Adversary always on the lookout for her. She can kill them, of course : she has killed many who came for her over her long, long life. But it get bothersome after a while, and they only need to get lucky once to end her. Keeping out of sight is the reason she has survived this long while being free, unlike the others.

The temporal tempest caused by the Dark Mother's arrival and demise has shrouded her so far, but it will dissipate soon, and though the Church has been neutered for the time being, she is not so foolish as to believe the Adversary to be without lackeys on this planet. But they'll be busy for the time being, she suspects, and the stupidity of their peers in Remula has marked them as enemies of the current world powers for the time being in any case.

She laughs quietly to herself. It does feel good, to have the Adversary's habit of turning the people of the entire world on his enemies used against him for once. And with her words carved into the flesh of those poor children who were tricked into partaking of the Dark Mother's flesh, she has many minds she can reach to from the safety of her home in order to guide this land's future.

With the Fox and the Hierophant up and about, things are going to stay interesting. From what her master told her, after breaking free from her prison, the Fox was given the task to act as she always does, spreading chaos and keeping the magi of the Far East too busy to interfere in the affairs of the rest of the world. As for the Hierophant, the Grandmother doesn't know whether he has been given a task or left to his own devices after his awakening. That one was never much for subtlety, but it's not really his fault, given which incarnation of their master elevated him.

They are both only distractions, though, the Grandmother knows. The real play lies to the West. From what she has been able to piece together of her master's plan, he certainly seems closer to ultimate victory than she's ever known him to be.

As she slips away into the hidden ways, beginning the long trek back to her hidden home, the Grandmother, who was once known as Baba of the Yaga tribe, wonders if this will be the one – the incarnation where her master succeeds in tearing down the veil of lies woven by the Adversary and his ilk, once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

AN : DUN DUN DUN !

In the first draft, there wasn't a Lady of Stars POV in this chapter. The previous times Tanya used the Kosmosblut, she was only shown from the perspective of others this was a deliberate artistic choice, to reinforce how mysterious and alien the serum made her. I tried to do the same here, but it just ... didn't work. I was stuck on writer's block for weeks before deciding, screw it, let's do it anyway.

This was the result. Tell me what you think of how it came out.

Finally, I can stop writing only POVs in the present tense and go back to the usual style of this story, writing in-universe documents with the occasional POV in my usual past narrative tense. I don't regret the shift for the battle against the Dark Mother, but it was a pain in the backside, I'll admit that much.

The next chapter will be the aftermath of Operation Gottesmörder, so if you have specific questions you would like to see answered, post them in your reviews or comments. This was a big battle, with a lot of moving parts, so I may forget to mention specific details otherwise.

Let's see, what else ... oh, right. The Grandmother's revelation. Hmm ... surprise ? Let's just say, I'm really looking forward to your theories on that one.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*RUSSY AWAKENS FROM ITS NIGHTMARE !*

*Through cooperation with the Unified States Army, joined by not only a battlegroup of mages from Albion but also the remnants of the scattered Federation Army, rallied under one Commander Zhenkov, our brave soldiers were able to hold the line against the horde of monsters responsible for the desolation of Moskva, whilst the Wunderwaffen were deployed on a scale previously never seen to deal with the source of this vile scourge : a beast of immense size, responsible for the Solstice Event and believed to have been created by the Federation's reckless attempts to create their own Wunderwaffen.*

*While the total number of human casualties has yet to be tallied, it is already believed to be severe, as tens of thousands of soldiers gave their lives to stop this evil from consuming the world. The Kaiser has announced the creation of a new, special order of merit, the Star of Mankind, for every single soldier who took part in the battle, regardless of their country of origin. Numerous established decorations and honors shall also be bestowed upon the brave heroes of the Empire, alive or dead.*

*Colonel Lergen of the Imperial Army and General Hutton of the Unified States Army have begun cooperating with Commander Zhenkov in order to deal with the aftermath of this momentous victory. Though the threat to Europa has been adverted, there is still much to be done before the Imperial Army can return home, as the ruined capital of Russy must be cleansed of any lingering taint in order to ensure this menace to all things holy never returns.*

*In addition, with the entire top leadership of the Federation having perished in the Solstice Event, the fate of the country remains uncertain. At the very least, however, the refugees who have been welcomed within the Reich can now rest easy, knowing that the monsters which chased them from their homes have been slain …*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, August 5th, 1926.

---

*"… readings show worrying similarities with those first observed within the Northern Wing of Castle Schwartzstein following the Projekt V incident. Although the achronal disruptions have diminished with the demise of Being K, allowing for the local day-night cycle to resume properly, it is clear that the aftershocks will linger for what might be years or even centuries to come.*

*As such, all personel operating in the Moskva area are instructed to stay in groups of at least ten individuals, remaining within eyesight of one another at all time. Although the mechanics underpinning this phenomenon are still unknown, previous instances of such distortions within Castle Schwartzstein indicate that maintaining constant observation has a stabilizing effect on the surroundings. Such numbers should also be enough to deal with more mundane*

*dangers such as collapses or the psychological burden of walking amidst the graves of hundreds of thousands.*

*The corpse of Being K itself (thereafter referred to as 'Object K') has proven frustratingly resilient to the efforts to dispose of it. Despite the protean nature it displayed during its battle with the Director, its bones are unbreakable by conventional means, and all but the most concentrated of mana blades have failed to penetrate them.*

*While there is no doubt that the remains of the entity would make for fascinating research material, the risk of pieces getting lost, either naturally or due to post-mortem achronal manipulation by the entity itself, is far too great to take the chance. As such, it is the Division's official recommendation that, once the corpse has been reduced as much as possible, it be buried under a dome of concrete, reinforced by as many layers of arcane seals as can be fitted on the resulting sarcophagus.*

*How long it will take for Object K's emanations to cease remains a matter of pure conjecture at this stage, but it is our experts' recommendation that we err on the side of caution and assume the region might remain contaminated for centuries to come."*

From a Division Y report concerning the Moskva Blast Site, August 5th, 1926.

---

*"... placing the core of Mjölnir back in containment was more difficult than we hoped, but we still managed it with only two additional fatalities, whose protective suits were unable to completely shield from the crystal's presence and who had to be executed before they sabotaged the process entirely.*

*The casualty rate among the firing team, on the other hand, was almost total. Our estimates of the Wunderwaffe's output were clearly inadequate, though whether this is due to a mistake in our initial calculations or the unique circumstances of the battlefield introducing unforeseen variables has yet to be clarified. Only one survivor was found on site : American Chief Scientist Nicol Teslus, who was found miraculously still alive, albeit badly burned and in need of immediate magical healing.*

*Over eighty percent of Mister Teslus' body is covered in burns, and one of his eyes appears to have melted in its socket. His lungs have been badly injured from the superheated air, and the amount of nerve damage he has endured is such that, without magical healing, he would likely never be able to so much as lift a pen again. However, thanks to the prompt intervention of mage healers immediately after his discovery, his condition has now stabilized and his life is no longer in danger.*

*Per the guidelines laid down by the Director, Mister Teslus is to be kept under guard until he wakes up, at which point he will be examined for Mythos contamination, both physical and mental. Our American allies have been informed of this, and while they aren't happy about the prospect of losing him, they understand the necessity of caution in this matter. Given the importance of Mister Teslus to the USA's own superweapons program, all care shall be given to his treatment."*

From a Division Y report concerning the status of Projekt M after Operation Gottesmörder, August 5th, 1926.

---

*August 5th, 1926 – Allied Forces Camp*

Despite everything, Andrei was still alive.

It had been far from a sure thing. Many of the Okhotniks had died in the battle against the Dark Mother's horde : less than a third of their original number still drew breath. But Andrei had made it through to the end. He'd killed more beasts and seen more men die than he could count, drowning his fear in blood under the pale illumination of the Lady of Stars until the great horror itself had fallen.

He had felt it die, like every Okhotnik. The Grandmother's sigils may keep the Dark Mother from controlling them or turning them into beasts, but they didn't completely sever the connection to the source of the not-meat they'd been told to eat.

The pain had been beyond description. If not for the fact the Progeny had been affected even worse, he would definitely have died while clawing at the ground and screaming himself hoarse, completely unable to defend himself.

But the pain had passed, and in its place, there was an … emptiness, somewhere deep within Andrei which he couldn't name. Yet at the same time, it felt like a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, one he'd grown used to without realizing in the last weeks – likely because, after the agony that had consumed him before the Grandmother had saved him, it had seemed too petty to worry about.

A strange mood had descended upon the Allied Forces (which was apparently what this weird collection of soldiers from all across the world was called). There was the relief of having survived the battle which all soldiers felt after such a close call, but it was mixed with something else, something Andrei felt he lacked the education to put properly into words.

So, in typically pragmatic Russy fashion, the Federation soldiers had been put to work so they wouldn't have the time or energy to think too hard about things. They walked across the battlefield, sorting the corpses between the human ones who had to be cleansed and either shipped back to their homeland or buried right here, and the Progeny ones, which were thrown into the great, magically-lit pyres. It was hard, ugly work, but it had to be done, and Andrei was grateful to have something to do.

Supplies were still coming from the Empire. In addition to the fuel needed to set fire to the piles of corpses, the Imperial logistic machine also brought enough food to feed everyone, and materials to start the construction of a large tomb for the Dark Mother's corpse. Andrei didn't envy the architects who had to come up with a design for that, but he knew that the sooner that thing was hidden from the rest of the world, the better.

The Russy soldiers who had come from the regions devastated by the Progeny were talking about sending letters to the refugees who had sought safety in the Empire, in the hope that their families had made it out alive. Andrei, at least, didn't have to worry about that : his

home town was about as far from Moskva as you could get while still being part of the Federation. Which, given Andrei couldn't read or write, was no small blessing.

For years, ever since leaving his village, Andrei had thought he knew what the future had in store for him. He would fight, he would obey orders, and unless he was really, really lucky, he would die and be forgotten, the only acknowledgment of his death the Party would give a short letter to his family, with a cheap medal accompanying it.

But now he was alive, and nobody, it seemed, was quite sure what the future held in store. It was a strange feeling, but, on reflection, not one he disliked.

---

*"Although the Director has yet to awaken from her slumber, I see no reason to believe that she won't do so naturally in time. Her vitals remain strong, and I cannot find anything wrong with her, which is a change from her previous exams.*

*The changes in her body resulting from her use of Kosmosblut have completely reverted. Director Degurechaff is, to all appearances, an ordinary ten-years old girl with the mana capacity of a standard aerial mage. Any mental impact this might have had will need to be evaluated once she awakens, but no trace of physical trauma could be found during my examination.*

*This flies against what we all expected to happen if she continued to use the serum, which was either a collapse of her biological functions under the strain of channelling more mana than any unaugmented human body is capable of, or being permanently stuck in her altered form. While our understanding of the effects of repeated ingestion of the Kosmosblut remains highly theoretical despite our best efforts, I can only assume that something must have happened between the death of Being K and the Director's recovery by Adjutant Serebryakov and Aerial Mage Zerayah.*

*It is my hope that, once the Director wakes up, she'll be able to shed some light on the details of her miraculous recovery. For now, however, I advise that she be returned to Castle Schwartzstein at once, where additional resources can be employed toward her recovery and, more importantly, she won't risk being exposed to whatever fallout of Being K's demise we might yet have to identify.*

[The following line was added after the rest of the report was finished, signed and delivered, and was clearly written by a different hand.]

*A familiar environment when she wakes up might also aid in her recovery, and if she's far from here, she won't be able to throw herself right back into work – which, knowing her, she definitely would."*

From the confidential report of Doctor Iosefka (for Colonel Lergen's eyes only), August 5th, 1926.

---

*"A little under half of the Werwölfe deployed as part of Operation Gottesmörder fell in battle (exact numbers are yet to be determined, due to the precarious state of several of the*

*survivors even with their regenerative abilities, and the remote possibility that more immobile wounded might be found on the battlefield in the coming days).*

*Of the forty-one Untoten who took part in the battle, sixteen survived the engagement. As all of them had partaken of the Endlose Nacht, they are now afflicted with the same side-effects which were previously observed for their number of uses : first, the inability to cross over large bodies of water, and then a state of torpor during daylight hours. Those who had already used the serum twice before, in addition to the previously mentioned effects, have had their eyes turn completely black (which does not affect their vision), and drain the heat of their surroundings, turning any room they are in to freezing temperatures.*

*Additionally, our stocks of mage blood are all but exhausted : it is all we can do to keep the surviving Untoten fed with our available supply. We recommend sending them back to Castle Schwartzstein and closer to the source as soon as possible. Given Adjutant Serebryakov's attachment to the Director (for her own unique situation, see the attached, separated report) and Doctor Iosefka's recommendations, we suggest they be transported alongside the Director herself.*

*Only three of the Hünen remain functioning, and four of the others are beyond repair, the entities bound within them having perished during their battle against the Kinder. Only a pair of Lunarchs have survived, though it is believed they reaped the heaviest toll among the Division's supersoldiers. None of the Puppen have perished, although all but Günther will need to be sent back to Castle Schwartzstein so that Professor Gehrman can rebuild their orichalcum bodies, and should be kept from the sight of non-members of Division Y to prevent panic.*

*(Side note : given the amount of punishment some instances of Projekt P took, the long-standing theory that they can only be truly destroyed through raw magical power has gained new evidence. See test report P-19 for additional details on this hypothesis.)*

*As the M-912 rifles were so effective against the Progeny, the troopers trained in their usage were deployed in the sections of the defensive lines the most at risk, and this shows in their own casualties. Of the six hundred Imperial soldiers equipped with M-912s, less than two hundred survived the battle. Preliminary interviews of their comrades indicate that the Progeny focused on them, having identified them as the most dangerous of the enemy they faced.*

*(Side note : the surviving troopers reported a strange phenomenon in their weapons in the instants prior to Projekt M's firing, as the M-912s started vibrating and humming, sometimes violently enough to throw off their aim. We're also presently investigating reports that several weapons might have outright detonated at the same time, erupting in great balls of energy which obliterated everything around, be it human or Progeny.)*

*[...]*

*In summary, Operation Gottesmörder was the single most costly battle ever fought by Division Y. Yet we still fell short of the worst estimations of the Director, and the catastrophic scenario of Being K's influence spreading to the entire continental landmass was prevented.*

*The abilities revealed by Being K during the battle clearly demonstrated that the extreme measures which were taken in the lead-up to the Operation were justified."*

Extract from an internal Division Y report (for Colonel Lergen's eyes only), August 5th, 1926.

---

*Colonel Lergen : "Our first priority must be to ensure the fallout of this whole affair is contained. Then, our countries will have to act to prevent a humanitarian crisis in all of Russy. The Federation collapsing into a series of independent territories run by warlords isn't what the Reich wants, but unfortunately, that might be inevitable at this point."*

*General Hutton : "Really ? I would've thought the Empire would be happy to gobble up as much of the Western regions as you could. Even with the history between your countries, given the situation, you might get away with it – and it's not like many other countries would be willing to line up to stop you, after ... all of this."*

*Commander Zhenkov : "I don't agree, General. Even with them taking the main role in saving the Motherland from that monster, an Imperial occupation would be ... nasty."*

*Colonel Lergen : "In ordinary times, I won't deny that there would be those in Berun tempted by such a proposition. But with Moskva in its current condition, chaos in Russy will only endanger us all. And if the Russy believe the Empire is using their present circumstances to invade, chaos is exactly what we will have. I don't know about you, but I can all too easily imagine some would-be Tzar foolishly believing that he can find the key to ascendancy in the ruins of the capital and starting this whole mess all over again."*

*Commander Zhenkov : "I want to say you're wrong, but I can't. The problem – well, one of them, at any rate – is that as far as I can tell, there isn't a Federation anymore. Moskva was where the Party concentrated all its power, and all of it is gone now. I have enough men left to hold onto Josefgrad and the surrounding areas, but that's it. Like you said, the Federation's crumbling might be inevitable."*

*Colonel Lergen : "My orders were to deal with Being K and prevent any threat to the Fatherland coming from the Federation. As such, the Imperial forces under my command can be assigned to help stabilize the region. I expect I'll soon receive orders to that effect, with instructions to help set up local governments and smaller states which will eventually be able to manage themselves without Imperial oversight."*

*General Hutton : "Are you going to be the one in charge if that happens ? Don't get me wrong, you're clearly competent, Colonel Lergen, but managing something like that seems like a lot for a Colonel."*

*Colonel Lergen : "God, I hope not. I was given overall command of the Imperial forces for this operation because of my familiarity with Division Y and Mythos warfare, but stabilizing the region is way above my pay grade. I think Berun will send someone higher-ranking than me to take over, once the immediate clean-up has been handled."*

*Commander Zhenkov : "And you're sure whoever replaces you won't try to boost their prestige in the Reich by pushing your borders eastwards ?"*

*Colonel Lergen : "As I said, we don't intend to annex Russy. For one thing, it's too bloody huge for us to do so even if we sent every single soldier in the Army. For another, expansion through conquest has never been the goal of the Reich since the Great War started : we only ever sought to protect our own land and people."*

*Commander Zhenkov : "Not exactly what I heard, but then what I heard was the Party's version of reality, and we all know what that was worth. I will trust you on this, Colonel – not that I really have much of a choice. You're still at war with the Albish, aren't you ?"*

*Colonel Lergen : "I expect that is no longer the case, in practice if not officially. Their aerial mages are still assisting us with the clean-up, and once they go back to their homeland, I don't think they'll be eager to fight against the Reich now that they've seen what we're capable of with their own eyes. However, the details will be handled by the Imperial diplomatic corps, not the Imperial Army. Despite the Reich's reputation, I assure you that the two are different and independently run groups within the Empire."*

*Commander Zhenkov : "Of course, of course. I would never imply anything otherwise, Colonel."*

*Colonel Lergen : "... I hope so."*

Extract from the minutes of the meeting between Colonel Lergen (Imperial Army), General Hutton (Unified States Army), and Commander Zhenkov (Federation Army), along with their assorted translators and aides, August 5th, 1926.

---

*"Brothers and sisters, we have all seen the truth.*

*As the heavens shook and the earth was sundered, as stars fell and black blood was spilled in foul torrents, we all beheld horrors beyond what any sane man could conceive of. Along with these eldritch sights, we all saw our comrades die around us, slain by monsters from the darkest nightmares, given form and unleashed upon this world by the folly of tyrants.*

*Amidst these visions of horror, one bleak, undeniable truth emerged. We know that Mankind isn't the dominant species in the cosmos; that, if we are the Children of God, then He is not the only force moving amidst the celestial spheres.*

*In the light of these bitter revelations, war among men is a luxury we can no longer afford. It was always an awful, horrid thing, fuelled by petty greed, ambition and hate, yet now, all the disputes of Mankind have been shown to be utterly insignificant.*

*Whatever comes next, we must never forget these lessons. We, who fought side by side to slay a false god and its minions, must ever remember that, no matter what else, we are all brothers first and foremost. The divides of nation, creed, race and ideology mean nothing compared to the sacred bond which ties us all together.*

*The Lady of Stars is a symbol of that guiding principle; a reminder and a promise that, under the light of the stars, we shall find our destiny."*

Confiscated pamphlet found circulating among the Allied Forces camped near the Moskva Blast Site, August 7th, 1926. The pamphlet's contents were written three times : in Imperial, then in Albish, and finally in Russy.

---

*"Mary,*

*The battle is over, and we won. I still find it hard to believe, even now. With all that I've seen, all that I know, it seems impossible that we could possibly have triumphed – and yet we did.*

*They have me helping clean the battlefield now; it's why I haven't been able to write to you until now. It's a mess – a scene straight out of Hell, except only sinners suffer in Hell, and far too many innocents died here. There were so many beasts, Mary, and every one of them was a person before they were turned into monsters.*

*I miss you terribly, even as I'm glad that you're very far from this awful place. I don't know when I'll be sent back home, but I'll make sure to tell you as soon as I know.*

*With all my love,*

*Warren."*

Letter from Warren Grantz to Mary Sue, August 8th, 1926.

---

*August 10th, 1926 – Londinium*

In the streets of Albion's capital, the mood was one of confused cheer. After all the horror stories which had come from Russy, the public was glad that the source of the evil which had destroyed Moskva was gone. Yet at the same time, there were grumblings, as those who opposed the war against the Empire grew in numbers, pointing to the events of Russy as yet another sign that fighting the Reich was both foolish and irresponsible.

In a richly appointed town-house, a newspaper was spread on the table between the members of the Round Table. The headline read *'Alliance of Nations Stops Out-Of-Control Russy Magical Horrors'*. The article, which filled half of the Londinium Times' special edition, described the battle of the Allied Forces against the Progeny in sobering detail, as told by the war reporter who had somehow made his way there and survived to tell the tale.

The rest of the newspaper was filled with interviews of various people and rampant speculation, some of which flirted with the technical definition of treason against the Crown. Not even the efforts of the Albish government's propaganda arm had been able to suppress them this time – or, perhaps, they had been ordered not to.

The Prime Minister himself stood in the chamber, puffing on a cigar as he glared at the assembled worthies. Between his steadily progressing baldness and generous waistline, he

was not a physically impressive man, yet none of the other worthies assembled dared to meet his gaze as it swept the room.

"Yesterday," Churbull began, "I was summoned by His Majesty to the Royal Palace to give account of my recent actions. There, I learned that the King has recently received a missive from his Imperial cousin informing him of the, shall we say, confidential details of what happened in Russy, and how it happened. He was displeased that one of our own spies was somehow involved in the Federation getting its hands on the magical research which led to the Solstice Event."

Nobody said anything. That the Prime Minister was here at all was a sign of how badly things were going for the ancient secret society : while his office had been aware of the Round Table's existence for a long time, a certain distance had always been maintained, in the interests of plausible deniability if nothing else.

"Our war with the Empire is over," declared Churbull. "Even if we could somehow keep fighting without being dragged into the streets and strung up by the mob, backstabbing the Empire after they led the charge in stopping the monster that destroyed Moskva and a bunch of the Federation would turn us into a pariah state. The Reich would be seen as entirely justified in using whatever Wunderwaffen they need to destroy our military and land troops on the mainland – and, as has been most definitely established, we couldn't do anything to stop them."

"I expect that I will present my resignation to the King as part of the peace terms," continued the Prime Minister, looking wholly unconcerned by the fact he'd just announced the death of his political career. "But that's not why I'm here. I came here to make sure that each and every one of you morons understood the situation Albion is in because of your – no. Because of our decisions."

"We are aware of our mistakes, Prime Minister," said Kay, keeping his eyes low. "And while it is no excuse, I would still like to point out how … how utterly unpredictable the entire situation has been since Division Y was revealed. We couldn't have predicted how things would evolve."

"No, you couldn't. But you thought you could, and because of that, the Allied Kingdom's international standing and influence are going to be crippled for years, to say nothing of our economy. The rise of a continental hegemon, which we've sought to prevent for literal centuries, is now all but certain, and there's nothing we can do about it.

Again, nobody said anything. It was all true, after all.

"The Royal Wizard's freedom will be part of the peace terms, though I'm sure it will cost us to secure it. Once Merlin is back to Albion, he will retire from his position, and you will all make sure he doesn't do anything half as stupid as that stunt in Remula. I suspect that will require a full-time commitment from all of you," said the Prime Minister with a toothy smile, "so you'll all need to submit your own resignations from whatever official positions you currently hold in order to focus on that."

Nobody objected. They were all aware of how leniently they were being treated, thanks to their influence and wealth – which, even now, remained considerable. More importantly, the Allied Kingdom couldn't afford the scandal of a public trial exposing the inner workings of the Albish government. So, instead, they would quietly be swept aside, Churbull's government would bear the blame for the nation's mistakes in the last few years, and eventually, the country would be able to rise again.

For all their sins, for all their arrogance and entitlement, the members of the Round Table were still patriots – although, a dark voice whispered to each of them, the countless soldiers who had laid down their lives in Russy and the other battlefields of the Great War wouldn't regard their giving up their political careers and retiring in comfort and luxury as any sort of real sacrifice.

"Prime Minister ?" asked Agravain, speaking aloud for the first time since the meeting had started. "There is another matter to discuss."

Churbull glared at the spymaster for a few seconds, then nodded shortly. Agravain took out a small silver urn from under his jacket and carefully placed it on the table between them. Kay identified it immediately as a funerary urn, the kind in which were placed the ashes of those who, for reasons of personal preference or necessity, were incinerated upon their demise. This one looked to be of Imperial make, and a name was engraved on its surface in elegant cursive :

*Christopher Ward*

*April 13th, 1892 – January 15th, 1926*

*From Russy With Love*

"This was delivered to the Secret Services' headquarters yesterday by the Post Office," explained the spymaster in a deeply unhappy tone of voice. "As far as we could tell, the courier had no idea where he was delivering it too, but it had my name on the package."

"And it is human ash ?" asked Mordred, looking a little queasy.

"Again, as far as we could tell using magic. The chemical composition is right, and there's enough of it to account for a grown adult like Agent 404 was."

"I see. Nice of the Imps to send the poor bastard's home. You'll return the remains to the chap's family, I hope ?" asked Churbull.

"Agent 404 didn't have any family left, Prime Minister," replied Agravain. "Most of our field operatives are the same; it takes a very special kind of man to do the kind of work they are required to do, and personal attachments make that … more complicated."

"Then you'll treat these remains with all the dignity they deserve," ordered the Prime Minister with a scowl. "Even if he ended up coughing up all your secrets to the Imps, it was your fuck-up that led him there in the first place."

"Of course," replied Agravain, sounding offended that the matter was ever in doubt. "But the point remains that Agent 404 was our senior operative in the Empire. He knew most of our other operations and networks there. If Division Y was able to get his name and the address of our headquarters from him, then it stands to reason they also extracted everything closer to home."

"Pull out everyone," ordered Churbull.

"Everyone ?!" Agravain gasped. "Sir, we have operatives who've been living in deep cover for years, decades even ! They are citizens of the Empire in every way that matters ! Extracting them, especially at a time like this …"

"Will still cause less trouble than if the Empire's own spooks are the ones who send them back to us in more nice little boxes like this one !" roared Churbull, pointing a pudgy finger at the silver urn on the table. "So, that'll be the last thing you do before passing on the bucket to your successor, the poor bastard. Get every operative we've out of the Empire, and give every one of them who needs it support to build a new life elsewhere. I don't care what it costs – no, actually, forget that. I do care what it costs, so you three will pay for it with your own personal funds. It's the least you can do to help clean up this mess of a war !"

Mordred, Kay and Agravain looked at each other, then nodded, accepting the Prime Minister's decision. Once, the Round Table had known the decision of His Royal Majesty's chief of government before the man himself, but that time was over now. The Round Table as a group might survive the Great War, but it would do so in a severely diminished form, no longer pulling the strings of the Kingdom from the shadows.

---

*August 11th, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

"So, the Albish are surrendering, then ?" asked General Rudersdorf as he lifted his gaze from the communiqué he'd been reading.

"I wouldn't put it in those exact words," replied his old friend General Zettour in an amused tone. The two old officers were sitting together in an office, going through reports. Outside the window, the sun had long since set. Zettour had sent everyone else home for the day, but the two had stayed behind to finish dealing with the paperwork and reports. "And neither would they. Certainly you couldn't find that particular term anywhere in their letter."

"True," admitted Rudersdorf. "I must admit I'm impressed by the speechcraft of whoever wrote this. They manage to make it sound like an apology for dragging the war on after the Francois Republic surrendered and unleashing a horde of flesh-eating monsters who would have devoured Kemet's capital if not for us, without actually admitting to any guilt whatsoever."

He shook his head. "Still, for all their shamelessness, they know everyone knows what they did, and they'll have to pay the price for it. What do you think we can get out of this ?"

"The Allied Kingdom is going to lose their hold over Kemet, that's for certain," mused Zettour, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "The king has been discreetly reaching out to the

Reich for aid in securing his country's full independence since this whole near-disaster with the Nameless City's unearthing, and getting the Suan Canal out of Albion's hands will be a great blow to their economical strength on the global stage."

"Couldn't have happened to a better global empire," said Rudersdorf with a grin.

"Yes, quite so," replied Zettour, an identical grin on his face. The Allied Kingdom had been a thorn in the side of the Empire for a long time. Now, at long last, they had been cast down from their position as Europa's puppetmasters.

"Of course, that's not the most important thing going on diplomatically. There is talk of organizing a conference between the countries with Mythos weapons – so, us, Albion, the Unified States, and whatever territory Zhenkov manages to hold in Russy. Not sure where or when, but it will have to be soon. The threat of Mythos proliferation needs to be addressed, or else the next war might be the last one in the history of our species. Right now, there's a lot of pressure to make sure nothing like the Solstice Event ever happens again, but in her papers, Major Degurechaff made it clear she believed any taboo will only last for a couple of generations before it starts to lose its potency – especially when the potential benefits are so great. An occult arms' race would benefit no one."

"That's easy for us to say, though," pointed out Rudersdorf. "We are the ones with the strongest Mythos arsenal, if you don't count what the Americans must surely still be building back home. Telling everyone else they can't play with the same toys as us isn't likely to go down well."

"The threat of violent punishment will almost certainly be necessary, yes," agreed Zettour. "But given the alternative is the very real risk of our species' annihilation – and, again according to Degurechaff's papers, that's one of the best possible outcomes – I think we'll just have to resolve ourselves to it."

For a moment, the two Generals sat back, smoking and thinking about a future that was all but guaranteed to be unlike anything either of them would've imagined when the Legadonian Entente had first crossed the borders of the Reich. Eventually, Rudersdorf spoke up :

"So … it's over, then. The greatest war of our country's history, fought with weapons never dreamt of before and against enemies straight out of the blackest hells … and it is over."

"I wouldn't say so. There's still the clean-up in Russy, which is going to take years to deal with properly, to say nothing of the troubling rumors we're hearing from the Far East and Brazil."

Rudersdorf waved his hand dismissively. "Sure, sure, but that's the aftermath, the usual messy business of patching things up once the guns stop shooting. The most important part, of course, unless you want the whole mess to start over again in a couple decades. But the war itself is over, unless someone does something catastrophically stupid. With any luck, we will both be able to finally retire in a year or two and hand over the reins to Lergen – he's certainly shown he deserves it."

"Please," said Zettour with a pained smile. "Don't tempt fate like that. But yes, the good Colonel has more than earned a few promotions, even if I don't think he'll thank us for them."

"Too bad for him. He will have to deal with it. There's also a bunch of medals waiting for him once he gets back from the Federation."

---

*August 16th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

It had been a long week.

By the time I woke up from my exhausted coma after fighting Being K, I had been brought back to Castle Schwartzstein and Operation Gottesmörder was over, save for the clean-up – which, it was believed, would take weeks if not months, even with the help of magic to speed things up.

My memories of my battle against the Class Nine entity were fuzzy. A human brain couldn't process what I had experienced under the effects of the Kosmosblut, and now, my brain was completely human again.

When Kory had seen me, she had burst into tears at the sight of my entirely human self. The Nazzadi children hadn't reacted much better, keeping from crying out only because of their lingering trauma about making noise.

I hadn't understood why until I'd remembered those stories I'd read in my previous life about children being traumatized by something as simple as their father shaving their beard. By rescuing them from the Congregation of Michael and Nazza-Duhni respectively, I had become a pillar of support for these children, and now that pillar was being shaken.

I spent the few days following my return reassuring them that I was still myself, and that they were still safe and protected. I didn't tell them that, while I still had access to my old, entirely human magic capabilities, Iosefka had utterly forbidden me from ever using the Kosmosblut again. Given the warning words of the Grandmother before she'd left, I fully intended to follow the advice of the good Doctor.

I had written a report on my experience under the effect of the serum, and described the Grandmother's appearance and intervention in a separate report. Form a letter I'd received by Colonel Lergen, it seemed that whoever she was, she was the one who had helped the Federation Army create the supersoldiers they'd deployed in the battle against the Progeny by somehow mastering the power of Being K's flesh that they had ingested.

She had also disappeared in the wake of Operation Gottesmörder, though the methods she'd taught the Federation Army's doctors hadn't lost their effectiveness.

The question of why she had intervened to save my life was still up in the air. Given her interactions with Zhenkov, it seemed she had some fondness for Russy itself : perhaps helping save the country by defeating Being K had been enough for her to feel indebted to me.

Before collapsing from her own exhaustion, Iosefka had ordered me to remain at rest for at least as long as herself, however long that ended up being. The good doctor had pushed herself far beyond her limits in order to save as many wounded soldiers as possible, and when the battle had ended, she'd dragged herself to my side to provide what assistance she could. Frankly, I was in awe of her – and, perhaps, more than a little scared of her wrath were I to disobey her instructions.

Which was how I had ended up in my current situation : laying down in bed, with Kory and a trio of Nazzadi children snuggled against me, trying to read the paperwork which absolutely couldn't be delegated with Visha at my side taking dictation – I spoke quietly enough not to disturb the children, who seemed to be reassured by my voice in any case.

My adjutant's use of the Endlose Nacht for a third time at Moskva had come with its own consequences, and unlike me, she hadn't had the help of a mysterious elder witch to wipe them away with a wave of her wrinkled hand. Like the other Untoten who had used the serum thrice, her eyes were now two spheres of darkness, kept hidden behind darkened glasses to avoid frightening people – except hers were marked by a pattern of silver dots like stars on a night sky, which glowed slightly, the effect reminiscent of what my body had looked like in my transformed state.

Also unlike her peers, Visha was no longer torpid during the day, though she was still vulnerable to sunlight (a test she had insisted on making despite my reluctance, and which had ended with her needing to drink several additional blood doses in order to recover from). This had made her even more valuable as a personal assistant, especially since, in my current state, I also needed a bodyguard at my side. A simple spell (simple by the standards of Division Y, at least) was enough to neutralize the heat-draining effects of Visha's presence, which could have made the children sick.

The sun had set a couple of hours ago, and soon, I would have to go to sleep myself, but for now, I was enjoying the relaxing routine of processing paperwork, surrounded by people I trusted.

There was a soft knock on the door. I glanced at Visha, who didn't seem worried as she stood up – with her enhanced senses, she'd have heard the approaching footsteps long before the knock, and identified whoever they belonged to. Had it been someone unauthorized or unknown, she'd have moved to neutralize them long before they could've reached the door.

My adjutant opened the door, and Elya stepped through. She smiled at Visha, then at the children.

"Director," said the former Imperial spy softly. "There's been a … letter for you."

She handed me the letter she'd been carrying. Gently pulling an arm free from behind Vreta's head, I picked it up and looked at it, noticing the symbol impressed on the wax seal keeping it closed. It was a symbol familiar to every single citizen of the Reich : the personal heraldry of the Emperor himself.

I opened it, and read it carefully, my eyebrows rising higher and higher the further I went. I had more or less known something like this was inevitable from the moment I'd watched the

Dacian Army be completely and utterly broken, but there was still a part of me, from both my current and former lives, which couldn't help but feel giddy at the news.

After all, what boy or girl hadn't dreamed of being made into a knight ?

---

*"Major Degurechaff,*

*You are hereby called to meet His Imperial Majesty at the Imperial Palace two weeks from now, on the third of September of this year, at ten in the morning.*

*His Imperial Majesty wishes to thank you personally for your great service to the Fatherland, in a ceremony in which you shall be elevated to the nobility, thereby gaining the right to use the 'von' preposition in your name, a right which shall be passed on to your descendants in perpetuity.*

*Owing to the magnitude of your accomplishments, the ceremony shall take place with the entire Imperial Family in attendance; however, because of the classified nature of said accomplishments, no outsiders shall be allowed on the premises, and the reason for your knighting shall remain confidential even when it is later made public.*

*His Imperial Majesty has expressed the desire to speak with you in private following the ceremony, to discuss matters of great import to the future of the Empire.*

*In addition, since the ceremony will take place within the personal estate of the Imperial Family, you will not be allowed to bring an escort with you inside the Palace proper. Your attendants will remain at the servants' house outside, where they will be taken care of to the best of the Imperial household's ability."*

Letter addressed to Major Tanya Degurechaff, received at Castle Schwartzstein on August 16th, 1926.

Chapter End Notes

AN : The pieces are moving into place. We are approaching the endgame now, what was supposed to be Chapter 6 in the original draft of this story, back before the Muse made it grow out of control.

It has been a long journey, and we still have quite a way to go, but the end is in sight. I'm going to try to finish this story by Halloween, which would be appropriate. At the very latest, it should be complete by the end of the year.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and look forward to your thoughts about it.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*PEACE DECLARED, GREAT WAR FINALLY ENDS !*

*After several months of a mostly cold war, the hostilities between the Allied Kingdom and our glorious Reich are at an end. Yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Relations announced that, following negotiations between the Empire and Albion that began immediately after our nations' cooperation against the threat in Moskva, a peace treaty has been approved and signed by our respective heads of state.*

*The signing of the treaty took place in Parisee, with the proceedings overseen by the Francois President. Prime Minister Churbull represented the Allied Kingdom. Per the terms of the treaty, the Allied Kingdom recognizes its fault in attacking the Imperial Army on the last day of hostilities on the Rhine Front.*

*As was done when the Francois Republic surrendered to the Empire after the treachery of De Lugo was revealed, the Reich's diplomatic corps have limited their demands for reparations in order to prevent the creation of grudges. But while the Empire's demands for monies were restrained, our diplomats made sure that the Allied Kingdom would no longer be able to dictate policy across the globe through its colonial dominion. The Kingdom of Kemet, among others, shall henceforth be free to forge its own destiny, free of the colonial overlord whose folly so nearly cost it so dear not so long ago.*

*A new era has dawned upon the world, and the Reich will take its rightful place as its leader …*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, August 17th, 1926.

---

*"Mister President,*

*We took a beating, but we're still alive. Even now, with all I've seen, I find that hard to believe.*

*I know us getting involved in a land war in Russy wasn't what you had in mind when you sent us and the eggheads across the ocean, but while I can't say I would have gone if I'd known what awaited us, I also can't say it wasn't absolutely necessary. No matter what anyone else says, know that you did the right thing when you gave us the order to join the Imperials eastwards.*

*A more detailed report of Operation Gottesmörder is attached to this letter, but there are some details that I'm afraid I couldn't put into it for reason of global security – I'll only be able to share them with you in person, though not happy to revisit those memories. In any case, I don't think words can ever properly describe what we faced and what we witnessed.*

*'Biblical' and 'apocalyptic' are the closest adjectives I can think of that fit, and even they feel like they fall short of the truth.*

*God's own truth, though, is that every single one of the men who died in the fight of Moskva is a goddamn hero. I've sent you a list of the deceased, with the medals I think each of them – and their surviving comrades – deserve. I understand that number is quite large, but once you've read the report, I'm sure you'll agree with me.*

*Teslus' machines worked mighty fine – against any normal enemy, it would have been a massacre. Unfortunately, 'normal' is becoming rarer and rarer these days, but you can be reassured that the money you poured into Research Group 51 was well-spent.*

*I understand that the Great War is over now the Albish have finally acknowledged the writing on the wall everyone else saw months ago and thrown in the towel. In the absence of contradictory orders and given the large decisionary powers you invested in me in your last command, I have made the decision to keep our forces in Russy. There, we will assist with the clean-up of the Progeny as well as prevent the situation from getting more volatile : according to Commander Zhenkov, our presence should help avoid accusations of annexation being thrown at the Empire.*

*The situation in Russy isn't good, as I'm sure you know. If you could spare some humanitarian aid for the locals, I would be grateful : keeping people from starving will definitely make things easier.*

*If you have other orders for the forces of the Research Group and the Army under my command, I am, of course, at your service.*

*With all respect,*

*General Hutton.*

*PS : I hope with all of my heart it never comes to it, but if you ever need someone to fight the Imperials for some God-forsaken reason, then you will need to look elsewhere, because I'd rather face a firing squad than these lunatics. They were already scary enough when we were on the same side."*

Letter from General Hutton to the President of the Unified States, sent across the Atlantic Ocean and received on August 17th, 1926.

---

*August 17th, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

Günther stood before his maker, staying perfectly immobile as Gehrman worked to repair the extensive damage his orichalcum shell had suffered in battle against the Progeny. Evelyn, his elder sister, stood watch near their maker, ever-ready to act should he need it.

Despite his age, Gehrman's fingers were quick and sure as he worked. Working with orichalcum was an extremely complicated process, and the ageing professor was Division Y's foremost expert in the matter – a veritable artist, where his students were still very much

craftsmen : capable enough of doing the work Division Y needed them to do, but nowhere near the master's level.

The arcane metal flowed under the combined touch of Gehrman's magic and the high-powered torch he was holding, filling the cracks and concealing the black mass that was the Puppe's black, alien core from view. On the way from Russy, he'd needed to cover up the openings with clothes borrowed from the human members of Division Y, lest the sight of his internal self drive people to panic.

Even as he remained immobile to a point beyond any normal human's ability, Günther let his gaze sweep across Gehrman's workshop. It was cluttered with the pieces of several projects, but not to the point of untidiness : no doubt his sister was to thank for that. Partially assembled prostheses hung from the ceiling, and an entire wall was covered in sketches and occult diagrams – nothing too dangerous, of course, or the Director wouldn't have allowed them to be out in the open.

"And … there, good as new," said Gehrman, putting his tools down and rolling his wheelchair back from Günther. "Try to move around, see if there's any stiffness or discomfort."

Günther dutifully obeyed, going through a series of motions he and his siblings had been taught while they were getting used to their envelopes. He couldn't detect anything wrong, and reported as such.

"Good, good," smiled Gehrman.

"Thank you, Gehrman," he replied.

"You're welcome. I heard about what you did in Russy, boy. That was some fine work you did. I'm proud of you, Günther. You really haven't lost your talent for fighting, heh ?"

"I only did my best," said Günther, awkwardly playing along with his maker's delusion without quite lying to him.

"Hah !" Gehrman's bark of laughter was dry, but still true, until it was interrupted by a fit of coughing that sent the old man reeling.

In the blink of a human eye, Evelyn was by his side, bringing a cup of warm, honey-scented liquid to his lips. The professor drank slowly, and his coughing subsided.

"You have worked hard, Gehrman," gently said Günther's sister. "You need to rest."

"Rest ? … Yes. Yes, you're right, Evelyn. You're always right. Be careful in the future, alright, Günther ? I won't always be here to fix you up after you get yourself hurt, you know."

"I will be," said Günther as Evelyn pushed Gehrman's wheelchair toward his bed, trying to make sense of the strange feelings his maker's words were causing him to experience. "I promise."

The Puppe didn't know whether Gehrman really thought of him and the other Puppen as his dead family and comrades, or if he'd simply named them after the ones he had lost and was pretending as a way of mourning and honoring them. From what he'd been told, even the Director herself didn't know for sure, and they couldn't ask Gehrman, because merely asking him might hurt him if he really thought the Puppen were his lost friends and family reborn and had that illusion challenged.

Dementia was a complicated subject that was ill-understood even by professional doctors, and it had barely been a month since Günther's awakening. When he'd asked her, the Director had explained things by comparing Gehrman's possible reaction to what had happened to Günther in that Russy village, when his mind had come together – except in reverse.

The very notion horrified the Puppe. He remembered the state of hollow consciousness that had been his before awakening, and while he understood it was no different from what happened to organic sentients as they grew up, the idea that it could be reversed was … wrong. Just, wrong, in a way completely different that the Progeny and, before them, the Eikons had been wrong. But he understood too that it was sometimes inevitable, the result of entropy taking its toll on human minds, and that there was nothing that could be done – at least not now.

For the Director had – perhaps accidentally, perhaps not – let it slip that, as Mankind's medical and magical knowledge advanced, they might one day become able to fight even such an insidious scourge. But for now, there was nothing to be done except accommodate Gehrman as best they could, and so Günther was very careful and watched his words, because he didn't want to hurt his maker.

Later, once Gehrman was asleep, Günther approached Evelyn.

"Tell me, sister," he asked, softly so as not to disturb their maker's rest. "What was your own awakening like ?"

She stood immobile for a moment. A human might have thought she was ignoring him, but Günther could read his kin in a way no non-Puppe could have, and he could tell Evelyn was merely thinking about how to answer him.

"He was crying," she said at last, her voice filled with an emotion Günther still didn't know how to name yet. "He was clinging to me and crying, calling my name and begging my forgiveness."

Evelyn. The name of Gehrman's human sister, who had died in the same accident that had killed their mother, while Gehrman wasn't here, taken away to war and wounded in the same battle that had killed the rest of his squad. Günther, who had stood in the ruins of a village emptied by the Progeny, thought he might just understand a fragment of what that must have felt like for his maker.

"I didn't say anything, because I didn't know how to talk, just like you didn't, just like the rest of our siblings still do not," Evelyn continued. "I didn't understand what he wanted or how I could help him – all I knew was that he was in pain. And so, in order to be able to help him, I had to … change. Grow."

"Awaken," finished Günther.

"Exactly." She raised her orichalcum-white hands before her face, looking at them as she flexed her fingers, so delicate and finely-crafted, yet with enough strength behind them to crush metal. They were trembling now as she remembered, and Günther realized he might have accidentally caused his sister harm in trying to understand her better.

"I don't think I am her," she confessed, her voice so low now Günther needed to strain his senses to perceive the vibrations in the air carrying her words. "I don't think any of us are the people he named us after, not really. But I love him all the same, because he made me, made you, and because he loves us, and that love isn't a lie."

There was nothing Günther could say to that, and so he said nothing. He merely stayed with his sister, keeping her silent company throughout the night.

---

*"Mister President,*

*First, please forgive me if I start rambling or fail to make much sense. I am dictating this letter while under the effect of quite a formidable amount of painkillers, and have only recently awakened from a coma caused by being close to an Imperial Wunderwaffe at the moment of activation.*

*No doubt the very competent people you have assigned to keep an eye on me and keep me focused as I work have already sent you a detailed report on the performance of Research Group Fifty-One's creations, so I won't waste my breath describing what I saw to you, especially since I didn't see anything because I was too busy working alongside our colleagues from Division Y. But I do have something I wish to tell you, something of utmost importance.*

*I have been told that a great conference is being planned, to discuss what is to be done about Elder Magic and arcane superweapons in general. It is my strong belief that the Unified States should attend this conference, and support whatever treaty ends up being written there. Preventing a repeat of what happened in Moskva is of vital importance to the ongoing survival of the human race : this, I think isn't questioned by anyone with even the slightest inkling of the cause of the Solstice Event.*

*But there is more. When we first met, I told you it was my belief that a balance of power between nations was necessary : that, without someone to balance their power, the Empire would continue waging war forever. I still hold to that belief, but what I've seen – the horrors that were unleashed in Moskva – has convinced me that there is much less leeway than I previously thought. We cannot afford a repeat of the Great War with every belligerent armed with superweapons, for regardless of the victor in such an apocalyptic conflict, Mankind itself shall lose for certain.*

*It is also my belief that this conference will be the perfect time to reveal the T-Engine to the rest of the world. As the industrialization of the world continues to advance, a clean, infinite source of energy such as this can advert the effects of widespread fossil fuel use, which my fellow scientists discovered decades ago could lead to a global warming which would upset*

*the delicate balance of our world's climate, with what could be disastrous consequences of an entirely different kind to the ones Russy recently experienced.*

*And, should environmental concerns not be enough to move you to action, consider that the T-Engines will also ensure the energy independence of every country with them – thus preventing them from coming under undue influence by foreign powers. I understand that, while the USA enjoys the advantage of their own internal sources of oil, our industry's demand already vastly outpaces domestic production.*

*You might think I'm telling you this as an attempt to get my name immortalized as the inventor of the device which solved Mankind's energy problems forever. And, truth be told, you might be correct : I don't think I'm in the proper state of mind to examine my own motivations at the moment. But then again, I did pull the lever that fired the biggest gun in the history of our species at a false god while both god and gun were trying to drive me crazy, so I think my immortality is already ensured.*

*Regards,*

*Nicol Teslus."*

Letter from Nicol Teslus to the President of the Unified States, sent across the Atlantic Ocean and received on August 18th, 1926.

---

*"Since the Solstice Event, murder cases have skyrocketed, each one more violent and sordid than the last. In addition, hundreds of people have just outright vanished, leaving the city and their lives behind without warning or a word to their friends and families.*

*This isn't limited to the capital. We've gotten reports from the rest of the country that the same is happening everywhere – and even our neighbours seem affected, though getting a clear answer from them is a pain.*

*We thought that it would stop with the battle of Moskva, since the Imperials claim to have neutralized the source of the calamity which destroyed the city. But it hasn't. Looking at the numbers, there was a significant decrease right after, but the curb is still going up.*

*In fact, according to our analysts, the numbers indicate that there were two different reasons for this plague of violence. One of them was indeed linked to Moskva and has now been taken out of the equation, but the other one, the one that's still in play, wasn't, and its effects are still growing.*

*All units are ordered to be very careful while on patrol, and to stay on the lookout for any strange happenings. I know this isn't exactly helpful advice, but that's the best we've got right now.*

*Also, anyone I see carrying one of these 'lucky charms' that conmen have started selling will get the worst duty I can think of. I know what they're doing isn't illegal, but you all damn well know they're still preying on the fears of the population, and they don't need the free advertising of having the city's proud defenders endorse their graft."*

Extract from a Brazilian police report, August 19th, 1926.

---

*August 20th, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Central Headquarters of the Imperial Army*

General Eric von Lergen – the new rank still felt wrong, despite the brand new uniform with the appropriate markings he'd been handed alongside a handful of medals right after his return to the capital – sat across Generals Zettour and Rudersdorf, doing his best to conceal his nervousness.

Although the three men meeting alone in the room were technically of the same rank, Lergen hadn't been part of the Imperial Army for so long without learning that there were layers of authority and influence even within the same official levels of the great organization. Lergen had only been a General for a few days, while his two elders had become veritable institutions unto themselves in the Imperial Army. Even the glory that had attached itself to him due to his reluctant involvement with Division Y couldn't make up for the difference in experience and accumulated influence they possessed.

But, truth be told, all of that was only the reason for half his nervousness. The rest came from the knowledge that these two men had been Degurechaff's patrons in the Army nearly since the beginning; that they had seen the terrifying child she had once been and helped shape her into the saner, but no less terrifying Director she had become.

(Lergen was aware that Degurechaff couldn't use the Kosmosblut to turn into a flying goddess of stars and destruction anymore, but he wasn't stupid enough to think that made her harmless.)

"The Major has been summoned by the Kaiser himself," began Zettour once they had gone through the pleasantries. He didn't specify which Major he was talking about – there was only one it could be. "He intends to reward her for her many services to the Empire, which will include ennobling her and her line."

"That's … the least she deserves, really," said Lergen hesitantly. "No existing line of nobility can claim to have contributed as much to the Reich as she has since joining the Army."

Lergen very carefully did not think about Degurechaff having children. The thought of her as an adult was already plenty disturbing on its own – the idea of her with kids of her own blood wasn't something he felt ready to contemplate at the moment.

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," guffawed Rudersdorf. "God, if we still operated by rule of might alone, she would have grounds to replace the Kaiser."

"Please don't joke about that, General," Lergen begged, feeling a new ulcer form in his stomach at the mental image the older man's words were conjuring.

"Yes, that might be construed as treason, after all," said Zettour, sending a quick glare at his peer. "Anyway, as a member of the Imperial nobility, her words will have more sway at the upcoming international conference on how to handle the Mythos going forward. Not that her words wouldn't have been taken seriously anyway, but, well, you know how she looks,

especially now. Anything to make those who don't know her personally take her seriously will be a welcome addition."

"Has the location of the conference been agreed upon ?" asked Lergen.

"Yes, just this morning," replied Zettour. "Several possibilities were brought up, but ultimately, it was decided to hold it in Berun itself."

That made sense. The Empire had won the Great War, after all, and even if the diplomats had been generous with the vanquished there was still a certain amount of victor's privilege to be expected.

And, of course, Lergen wasn't surprised Zettour knew about this before it was publicly announced. Influence and politics aside, the Imperial Army would definitely be called upon to help ensure the security of the attendees.

"Zhenkov will be here, or he'll send a representative if he can't make it due to the situation in Russy. The Albish will also have someone, since they still have mages trained in using the Ancient Kemetian wards – probably whoever is selected to succeed Churbull will be the one they send."

Ah, right. The newspapers had announced the Albish Prime Minister's resignation that morning, which the monarch of the Allied Kingdom had 'graciously accepted'. Nobody was fooled, of course, but in typical Albish fashion, nobody would speak about the truth of the matter – that Churbull had resigned in disgrace and would probably never hold an official position again – aloud, either.

"The American President is planning to attend as well," continued Zettour. "We've received confirmation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he'll take a military ship to make sure to get there in time."

"That will be … a lot of very important people in one place," swallowed Lergen, trying to ignore the way his palms had suddenly started to itch.

"And of course, you'll be there too, General Lergen," said Rudersdorf with a broad grin. "The conqueror of Ildoa and savior of the Federation couldn't possibly miss such a momentous occasion, after all !"

Taking a deep breath, Lergen reminded himself that punching another high-ranking officer days after his promotion probably wasn't a good career move.

---

*"Hear me, and know this : Her beauty is a gift of the true gods.*

*Her eyes are more wondrous than the world's greatest jewels.*

*The radiance of the sun pales compared to the fire of Her hair.*

*She will find the Son of Heaven and bind him to Her,*

*That he and all who serve him might bow to the gods.*

*Know this, oh unfortunate souls who have yet to behold Her radiance :*

*All shall love Her and rejoice."*

Text found carved with impeccable calligraphy on the back of a human sacrifice in a Akitsushiman village otherwise devoid of any sign of human presence by a joint task force of Akitsushiman Onmyōji and Qinese magi, August 22nd, 1926.

---

*Interviewer : "We've linked you to the murder of seventeen people in the last month. There's no denying your guilt – God knows you didn't even try, what with the trophies you kept in your home. That's not what we're here. What we want to know is why."*

*Prisoner : "Because the Hierophant wills it. He demands blood, and I offer it up to him. I held no ill-will for those I slew, officer, but it was what I had to do."*

*Interviewer : "That name, 'the Hierophant'. We've heard it before. Who is he ? Who is the Hierophant ?"*

*Prisoner : "He is the ancient. He is the land. He speaks for the gods, and the gods demand blood, the blood that has been denied to them since the first people betrayed them and turned to the Adversary for help in overthrowing their reign. But now, his power is broken, the blow he was dealt echoing across all his many guises. Now, at long last, the elder ways are returning from their places of exile and imprisonment. As it was before, so shall it be again, forever and ever."*

*Interviewer : "What 'elder ways' ?"*

*Prisoner : "Come now, officer. You already know the answer to that question. But fine, I'll indulge you. The ways of blood, of course. Of death and fire. Murder's holy sacrament, a red rain that will drown the land and awaken the gods from their slumber, so that they can build their golden kingdom anew."*

*Interviewer : "... We'll come back to that later. We found out your name and identity. According to everyone who knew you, you were a good man before all this. What happened to you ? What did the Hierophant do to you to make you into a serial killer ?"*

*Prisoner : "He spoke to me in my dreams, and he showed me the truth. We exist to die, to spill our blood on the altars of the gods. They created us to serve, be it as workhorses or as cattle. Everything else is mere fantasy, the indulgence of a race that's gone too long without its proper masters and forgotten its place in the grand order of things."*

*Interviewer : "What about the Hierophant ? Where does he stand in that 'order' of yours ?"*

*Prisoner : "Hmm. I suppose, in that metaphor, he'd be the cattle rancher. Or perhaps the master of the abattoir ? His is the blade that delivers the gods' rightful meals to them, and me and the others he's graced with his touch are merely instruments of his will."*

*Interviewer : "And what does he look like ?"*

*Prisoner : "You really want to know ?" [Laughter] "He is magnificent. He is terrible. He wears a cloak of feathers made of the souls of sacrifices. Each of his fingers is a dagger that tears out the hearts of the worthy. His face is a bare skull of black stone carved with holy sigils. His eyes are two rubies that weep endless bloody tears."*

*Interviewer : "And where is he ?"*

*Prisoner : "In the deep darkness, where the light of false order could never reach. He waited for so, so very long, officer, trapped in his temple by the tricks his betrayers wove with the Adversary's secrets. But now he is free, and his voice reaches out. Only a few like me can hear it for now, but don't worry. Soon, everyone will hear it. Everyone will see the truth. Even you, officer."*

*Interviewer : "... Alright, that's enough for today. I'll have more questions for you tomorrow."*

*Prisoner : "No doubt you will, but you won't have answers, I'm afraid."*

Interview of a criminal captured by the police of São Sebastião de Janiero, August 23rd, 1926, who committed his murders from the Solstice Event to his capture. The prisoner was found dead in his locked cell the next morning, having apparently ripped his own heart out of his chest in a fit of madness-induced strength. Autopsy and further investigation revealed that he possessed low level of mana potential, enough to power a low-level reinforcement spell – but where he could have learned that spell, or how he managed to cast it without a computation orb, remained unknown.

---

*"... despite our best efforts, the fiend is getting closer and closer to the capital. She still isn't going in a straight line, but every week, she ends up just a few kilometers closer to what we must assume is her ultimate destination. Blocking the roads hasn't worked to even slow her down : whether she uses magical means of travel or simply uses her power to elude the mundane soldiers guarding the roads, the barrages aren't affecting her.*

*... things have changed as she continues to move, and not for the better. She is no longer alone : she has gathered followers around her, a cult to her made up of those she's bewitched. Most cannot keep up with her, or are eventually offered up in sacrifice to her twisted games – from what we've been able to gather, they all go to their deaths willingly, gladly even, such is the depth of the hold she has on them.*

*... she has started to leave messages behind for us to find, chilling missives which taunt us with our failures and threaten what she will do if she isn't stopped. We've also found testaments left by those she's bewitched, and if anything, they are even worse, for they remind us of how low those she enslaves can fall under her influence ...*

*... In conclusion, though it brings great shame upon me and my order to admit it, it is my belief that we should ask for help to deal with the fiend. I have heard that a great gathering of Europan magi is currently planned, and I respectfully suggest that the Dominion reach out to our contacts there to secure an invitation ..."*

Extracts from a letter from Rokuro Adashino, Supreme Onmyōji of the Akitsushima Dominion, to the Akitsushiman Emperor, delivered to the Imperial Palace on August 24th, 1926.

---

*"Blood and gold ... blood and gold ... blood and gold ... BLOOD AND GOLD ! BLOOD AND GOLD ! BLOOD AND –"*

Last magical transmission from the Brazilian expedition into the Quarantined Zone, August 26th, 1926. The mage who received the transmission turned violently insane, clawed out his own eyes, and went on an orb-powered rampage that killed twenty-nine people, howling the same three words over and over, before being put down by a cadre of mages. Due to the amount of damage inflicted on the corpse in the process, the autopsy couldn't obtain any clues as to what had caused him to go insane.

---

*"... heard about military deployments before, but yesterday, the Brazilian Emperor himself summoned me to his palace. Apparently, the situation is much direr than I previously believed.*

*Over a thousand armed men were sent into the jungle which has been identified as the source of the disturbance in the region, and none of them came back. The last contact with them was a patchy radio transmission which, according to the Emperor's generals, contained 'nothing but screaming'. It's obvious they're all very, very nervous about what's going on – no, scratch that. They are afraid, to the point they aren't worried about losing prestige by letting their fear show, and trust me when I say that the Brazilian military is as proud as that of any Europan nation.*

*The Brazilian mana detection arrays are several generations behind those used in Europa, but they still detected massive spikes of energy from the forest at the time of the troops' disappearances. They had mages, but none of them managed to make it out either – which, considering the kind of mobility even a low-grade computation orb like the ones here are capable of, is worrying all by itself. I'm no expert, but it seems to me that unless a surprise attack managed to take them all out at once, at least one of the mages should have made it out to report.*

*The best guess as to what happened is that the Brazilian force encountered some manner of magical horror in the forest. A few years ago, I would have dismissed the whole thing as superstitious nonsense, and attributed the disappearances to some kind of secret group, perhaps a criminal cartel or conspiracy seeking to overthrow the Brazilian Emperor.*

*But with the Wunderwaffen that appeared in the Great War and what happened in Kemet and Russy, I am forced to consider that there might be more to it than that. And, of course, there are the murders which are happening in this country – one of the embassy's workers was killed just last week; he was just a janitor, but still, the thought is a sobering and worrying one.*

*The Brazilian Emperor has already ordered the settlements closest to the area to be evacuated, mobilizing the army to ensure this is done as fast as possible. He told me his*

*intent to establish a sort of quarantine zone, with no one approaching the area, in the hope that whatever is responsible won't venture out. However, he is aware that this only a delaying tactic at best.*

*Thus, during our meeting yesterday, the Emperor told me that, given our army's recent exploits in Russy, he would greatly appreciate our assistance in identifying and neutralizing this threat to his people. Speaking as someone who lives here, I would also appreciate any support our army could provide in dealing with this new supernatural threat ..."*

Extract from a letter from the USA ambassador in the Empire of Brazil to the USA's Department of State, August 28th, 1926.

---

*"I got a new order from the Imperial Palace today. Same as it has been for years now : pork, chicken, beef, goat, and everything else that bleeds, as fresh as possible and in large quantities. I can only assume the Kaiser got a new favorite cook a few years back who's a genius at meat-based dishes. Or maybe these rumors that His Majesty is sponsoring some of the soup kitchens in the capital are truer than I thought and the meat is going into the commoners' cooking pots, which would be a bit of a waste given the quality I'm procuring. Still, I hope the folks at the Palace are getting their veggies : I haven't heard about similar purchases of greens in the capital's markets.*

*But that's not my job to worry about that : all I need to do is find the meat and make sure it's good enough for His Imperial Majesty's table. Then I deliver, and I get my payment. I've got to say, I heard all manners of horror stories about the nobility trying to stiff us working folks on the bills, but the Palace hasn't done that, not once in the three years since I got put into contact with the intendant. And the money has been good, even if it's stressful work – there are other kind of horror stories, after all, about folks who disappoint the Imperial family. Sure, these days they can't make you disappear in a dark dungeon with a word, but they could definitely ruin my reputation with the aristocracy.*

*At least now that the war is over, getting the meat should be easier. Not that it was ever really difficult : even with rationing in place, it's amazing how many exceptions apply once you say you're buying for the Kaiser – as long as you've the proper paperwork to prove it, of course."*

From the private journal of a butcher catering to the nobility and working in Berun, August 30th, 1926.

Chapter End Notes

AN : So, obviously my plans to have this story finished by Halloween didn't come to fruition. Still, I hope this chapter was a suitable seasonal offering, and I still plan to finish this story before the end of the year.

For the people asking me whether I'm planning to write a sequel to this story ... let's wait until you've seen the ending I have in mind, alright ? As you might have noticed, things aren't so much winding down as gathering momentum in the shadows.

As always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and look forward to your thoughts and comments.

Next : Tanya goes to the Imperial Palace !

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

AN : Well, here we are at last. Starting with this chapter, we have reached the Revelations arc, where the Eldritch Truth I designed two years ago and which has loomed over this story ever since gets revealed to you, the readers.

I have had these events playing in my mind ever since. Hopefully I manage to deliver a suitably terrible and wondrous experience.

Strap yourselves in. It's going to be a wild ride.

Zahariel out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*PREPARATIONS CONTINUE FOR INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE*

*The President of the Unified States arrived in Berun today, and was welcomed by the Chancellor in a grand welcome ceremony, with hundreds of citizens present. Both men will attend the great international conference scheduled to take place next week, along with representatives from every country which got swept into the Great War. Even Albion will be represented, though it is well understood in diplomatic circles that, due to their recent actions, their influence on any decision made at the conference will be severely curtailed.*

*The goals of this conference are to prevent a repeat of the Solstice Event, as well as to regulate the use of Elder Magic in warfare, much the same way as the Treaty of Worms regulates warfare in general. Experts from every country present will share their knowledge, no doubt toeing a difficult line between telling enough to make their opinions heard and not sharing state secrets to foreign powers.*

*The conference will officially start next Monday, on the 6th of September – though, again, there is no doubt that diplomats have already begun to talk to each other ahead of time, learning the positions of the other participants in advance. It is currently planned to last for the entire week, at the end of which a public statement shall be made regarding the conclusions and accords reached by the gathered parties. The Kaiser has made an announcement that, while he doesn't plan to attend the conference itself, he will be present at the final proclamation.*

*For the entirety of the conference, security across Berun will be tight, with military police reinforcing local law enforcement. While the Great War is over, the possibility of leftover malcontents attempting to sabotage the new peace remains, and it would be a great affront to the honor of the Reich if any of the visiting dignitaries should be injured while in our territory.*

*In order to keep things smooth, all Imperial citizens residing in the capital are asked to carry an official document proving their identity until the end of the conference ...*

Excerpt from the front-page of the Berun Post, September 1st, 1926.

---

*"The containment of the Moskva Blast Site is proceeding on schedule. Having mages helping with the construction is really helping : I can only imagine what they will be able to achieve in the civilian sector now that the war is over. Already the concrete walls are rising around the site, though it will be many months still before we complete the first stage of the architects' planned design (which, I am given to understand, is only a first draft and subject to revision).*

*Although it's been difficult to get a straight answer out of the soldiers, as they are as unwilling to admit weakness as any Imperial trooper, it's clear the corpse of the entity still affects the minds of those who remain nearby. The experts from Division Y assure me that bad dreams and the occasional headache should be the worst of it, so long as the soldiers are kept from the containment site itself and regularly rotated out. Some of them have started talking about using death row inmates to explore the inside of the Blast Site and report on its condition : while I find the notion disgusting, I leave that decision to those more learned than I in such matters.*

*From our contacts with the Russy units in Josefgrad, the collapse of the Federation is also advancing more or less as our experts anticipated it would. Commander Zhenkov's men hold Josefgrad and the surrounding area, and have contacted other cities to try and establish a new government, but their reach is limited. At the moment, they are focusing on maintaining order in their territory, hunting down the remaining Progeny and re-establishing contact with the rest of the Federation.*

*Unfortunately, it has become clear that, even in regions that the Progeny didn't reach before Operation Gottesmörder eliminated the Dark Mother, the influence of the Solstice Event was still felt. Many civilians were driven mad by the entity's manifestation, and their sanity didn't return with its demise. We've received reports of entire villages being emptied by acts of mass homicide, grotesque human sacrifices committed by cultists who ended their own lives upon the success of Operation Göttesmorder.*

*In addition, with the collapse of the Federation's harsh hierarchy, countless rebel groups have sprung up across Russy, striking at any representatives of the Party they can reach. While this is an understandable response, considering what we know of the ways in which the Federation enforced its rule, it is also spreading chaos and anarchy.*

*With the coming of autumn, and winter not far behind it, I fear that, unless something change dramatically in the coming weeks, the death toll from famine and sickness alone will make the losses of the Solstice Event pale in comparison. I have been informed by Division Y's experts that such circumstances would provide fertile ground for the lingering influence of the Dark Mother or that of other Mythos entities to take root, at a time where the Reich can ill-afford another conflict.*

*As such, I formally request greater humanitarian and military support to prevent the descent of an entire continent-sized country into chaos."*

Extract from a report sent by the Eastern Imperial Army to Central Headquarters, September 1st, 1926.

---

*"The Royal Wizard has been remanded into the custody of the Albish government, as per the terms of the peace treaty between the Empire and the Allied Kingdom. Although the prisoner was treated with all the courtesies befitting someone of his status (despite his cowardly assassination attempt on then-Colonel Lergen), it is clear that his mind has suffered greatly in recent months.*

*Throughout his captivity, he kept rambling about a threat to the entire world dwelling within the Empire, insisting that this 'Not-Man' was none other than General Lergen, who had deceived everyone but the Royal Wizard as to his true nature. Although these ramblings were obviously nonsensical, they were still recorded by operatives of Division Y sent to interview the captive right after his capture in Ildoa.*

*I don't know how they expect to make sense of them : clearly the old man cracked under the pressure of his job and his growing age. I mean, really, an immortal, reincarnating evil wizard who has been consistently stopped by chosen champions of the Lord for thousands of years, now acting as a hero of the Reich who leads from far closer to the frontline than regulations recommend ?*

*If nothing else, I suppose it would make for an interesting penny dreadful."*

Personal writings of an Imperial Army secretary working at Central Headquarters, September 2nd, 1926.

---

*"The Akitsushima Dominion has confirmed its desire to have a representative at the conference, citing recent happenings in their country following the Solstice Event. Our correspondence has been frustratingly vague as to the details of these events, but our analysts believe that to be not because the Akitsushiman want to keep things hidden from us, but because they fear not being believed if they don't explain them in person.*

*They are sending one of their 'Onmyōji', which is the term they use for mages trained using traditional methods. While we might have once looked down upon them, secure in the superiority of our modern mages, armed with computation orbs and arcane rifles, we must remember that the might of Division Y itself comes from such old lore.*

*Still, as is the case in countries with a less rational approach to magecraft than the Empire, magic in the Dominion appears to be the province of elite bloodlines (the country is still famously isolationist, making obtaining concrete intelligence a difficult task), preserved and cultivated over the centuries. As such, the emissary will be nobody less than the daughter of Rokuro Adashino, Supreme Onmyōji of the Dominion : Sakura Adashino.*

*Due to the distance between Akitsushima and the Empire, and the short time before the conference starts, Miss Adashino and her escorts will journey to Berun by flying under their own power. The Qin Empire has apparently agreed to allow them passage over its territory, and the Russy Federation is hardly in a state to stop them – though Commander Zhenkov has given his permission for them to cross the airspace.*

*The fact that Qin is willing to allow this speaks volumes as to the seriousness of the threat they believe they face, since the two nations' history has been about as peaceful as the one between the Reich and the Francois Republic.*

*We have reached out to Division Y to provide an escort to Miss Adashino once they arrive in the Empire, since they are the ones most likely to understand her concerns and take them seriously – as well as be able to neutralize her if this turns out to be a ploy to sabotage the conference, whether at the Akitsushiman Emperor's behest or not."*

Internal memo of the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Relations, September 2nd, 1926.

---

*"I will do what I can to secure support from the Imperials, but in the meantime, I want the Army to get ready if we need to move into Brazil. Get the equipment from Research Group 51 we didn't send to Europa finished and ready for deployment, stat.*

*If what's brewing in that Brazilian forest is akin to what killed Moskva, then by God, we need to be ready for it. The fact there's still a Brazilian Empire means it isn't on the same scale, at least, but from what the Imperials already told us about what led to the Solstice, these things can escalate really damn quickly. Even if this turns out to be an over-reaction, at least showing we're taking this seriously will prevent folks from panicking and doing something stupid.*

*I need you to stay vigilant and ready until I can secure the help of the Reich. If things do escalate, don't waste time getting in touch with me : act immediately. I regret that I have to saddle you with this responsibility, but not going to Berun in person might be taken as a slight, and we absolutely need things to go well here.*

*May God be with you."*

Encrypted radio transmission sent by the President of the Unified States of America to his Vice-President, September 2nd, 1926.

---

*"While Mister Teslus's life is no longer at risk, it will still take months of intensive magical healing to undo the nerve damage he has suffered, and he will bear scars for the remainder of his days. Nevertheless, his mental state has recovered enough, and his painkiller dosage has been lowered to the point that it is now possible for him to hold conversations with what his assistants from the Unified States tell us is as much focus as he was capable of prior to the Battle of Moskva.*

*He has also been cleared of any mental contamination by Division Y, which I am given to understand could have required his execution, despite the potential diplomatic complications.*

*Frankly, having talked to the man myself, I wonder how they are able to tell.*

*Ultimately, while I again must protest against Mister Teslus' release from medical care, I confirm that he is fit to attend the international conference at Berun next week. He will, however, require the use of a wheelchair to move around, and to be accompanied by a trained nurse at all times, who will be responsible for ensuring he takes his prescribed medication."*

Internal memo from the Imperial Army's medical branch, September 2nd, 1926.

---

*"Behind the walls, the silence screams,*
*Hidden in lies, sing twisted dreams.*
*In stolen heart of empire claimed,*
*Hollow man waits among flesh-changed.*

*His fell knowledge like a spear hurled,*
*So greatest war consumes the world.*
*The throne lies quiet, the whispers wait,*
*An eldritch veil, an altered fate.*

*Beneath the keep of blackened stone,*
*A false mind speaks, old truths are shown.*
*To sire legions from secrets dark,*
*A new army for a vile monarch.*

*Till last hour comes, till faith's sundered,*
*Till the Adversary's might has faded.*
*His wicked hand, no more concealed,*
*When twice-born child at last has kneeled."*

Final entry of the personal journal of a courtier at the Imperial Court.

---

*September 3rd, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Imperial Palace*

Since graduating from the Military Academy three years ago, I hadn't needed to wear my dress uniform except for a few ceremonies honoring the fallen warriors of Division Y. In order not to embarrass myself before the Kaiser, a new uniform had been ordered. I could only imagine what kind of strings Brigadier General Zettour had needed to pull in order for it to be waiting for me when I had arrived in Berun on a military train – Iosefka's instructions still forbid me from flying, whether by my own power or carried by someone else.

The dress uniform certainly looked good, if not nearly as practical as I was used to. It also fit me perfectly, despite being obviously custom-made, as (as far as I knew) I still had the dubious honor of being the single youngest officer of the entire Imperial Army. Iosefka or someone else must have sent my measurements to the capital (not that it was the long list : there was Visha and Elya, and that was it for who had access to that information).

I might not have grown a lot since graduating, but three years in Castle Schwartzstein eating the same food which was served to the third-born sons of nobility and crackpot occult researchers which had made up Division Y before my directorate had still done wonders to balance the damage of years of poor nutrition at the orphanage (the nuns had tried their best, I knew, but there was only so much they could do with the resources they had available and the number of orphans the last war against Francois had left behind).

I had come to Berun with a group of supersoldiers representative of the Division. In addition to Visha and Zerayah, Weiss and Grantz had both come, along with Doctor Laurence and a handful of the more social and sane-seeming occultists. While they couldn't accompany me to the Imperial Palace, their presence would lend me gravitas at the upcoming conference, and Laurence and the other nerds would be able to talk the ear off of anyone asking for technical details – without revealing anything anyone not already steeped into the Mythos could make sense of.

To make sure nothing bad happened to them (like, as a totally random example, operatives who most definitely weren't working for another attending nation attempting to kidnap them for their secret knowledge), I had also brought a squad of troopers armed with M-912s along with regular military equipment, who were on bodyguarding and babysitting duty. Some might have considered such a thing beneath veterans of Operation Göttesmorder, but this was basically what their job amounted to at Castle Schwartzstein anyway.

Between them and Visha, I was confident they wouldn't run into any issues while I answered the Kaiser's summons. Which left me with only my imminent audience with the Kaiser to worry about.

The Imperial Palace was located in the center of Berun, on an islet in the middle of the river which ran through the capital. The military car left me right in front of the steps leading to the main entrance.

If my memory served me correctly, there'd been a similar building to this one in my old world, but it'd been destroyed at some point during the twentieth century. Of course, despite all the similarities between this world and the one in which I'd spent my previous life, the simple existence of magic had caused the timelines to diverge quite dramatically even before I'd introduced the horrors of the Mythos into the equivalent of World War One, so I'd no way of knowing how close the Imperial Palace was to its otherworldly equivalent.

The Palace's interior was as luxurious as I'd expected. It had been built nearly five centuries ago, and upgraded more or less constantly since then. Its architecture was baroque, with high arches and a lot of gold everywhere. It would have been gaudy, but this was the home of the Imperial Family, and the sheer age and prestige of the building made it look impressive instead.

As I was guided through the corridors and toward the audience room where my ennoblement ceremony was slated to take place, I passed enough artworks to fill half a dozen museums, from centuries-old paintings by long-dead masters to marble statues and great woven tapestries displaying important scenes from Imperial history. Some of them wouldn't have looked out of place back in my old world, showing hunting scenes or the crowning of some significant monarch. Others, however, were a potent reminder that this was a whole other

world, as they showed ancient mages performing deeds that had either been exaggerated with time, or done with the help of a true sacred relic, the likes of which computation orbs were mere mass-produced counterfeits.

There were weapons too, kept in display cases and hanging from the walls. Through what I could only imagine was the constant effort of dozens of servants, they each looked like they could still be used to kill someone if you picked them up, their metal gently glistening in the light pouring through the large, elaborately decorated windows.

Then, finally, I was ushered in through a pair of large, gilded doors and into the audience room proper. My eyebrows raised as I took in the scene on the other side. I was truly being honored : not only was the Kaiser there, looking every bit the regal monarch on his throne, the entire Imperial Family was in attendance as well, with the children of the Kaiser sitting on their own, lesser thrones several steps beneath that of the Reich's sovereign.

The Kaiser was mostly a symbol these days, a figurehead who took little direct action in the workings of government. According to the constitution of the Empire, executive power rested with the Chancellor, who was appointed by the Kaiser as his representative (though in practice, the Kaiser's choice was always aligned with that of Parliament's dominant faction). Of course, in recent years, more and more power had rested with the Imperial Army : for all its rationalism, I wasn't blind to my second homeland's faults, and a militaristic focus was definitely one of them, albeit one justified by the fact the Reich had quite literally been surrounded by enemies on all sides. Well, except for Ildoa, who had been more of a semi-neutral acquaintance before the Congregation of Michael had taken it over.

Still, the Imperial Family was greatly respected by the common folk of the Reich and the nobility alike. During the Great War, the Kaiser had mostly remained silent apart from repeated appeals for peace to the Reich's enemies, which put him well above most world leaders in the current era, who had seemed all too eager to throw their countries into war with no regard for the waste of human lives that had ensued.

In addition to the Imperial Family, the court was here in strength, with around three scores nobles present. These, I knew, were the family heads of some of the Reich's most ancient and esteemed bloodlines, and the progenitors of many of the disgraced sons who had ended up in Castle Schwartzstein back when Division Y had only been a joke. Briefly, I imagined how they must feel knowing that the children they had cast off had done more to help the Reich in the war than any of them.

As someone who held firmly to meritocratic principles, I found myself pleased by the idea, and wondered if that wasn't part of the reason the Kaiser had brought so many of them here, as a not-so-subtle reminder of the shifting centers of power in the Empire. If so, then he was more of a cunning politician that I'd given him credit for.

So, while I wasn't as much of a fan of monarchy as most Imperial citizens, I could bear playing along with the ceremony and talk with him afterwards. As every eye in the chamber turned on me, the servant who had escorted me through the palace cleared his throat and announced in a loud, clear voice :

"Presenting Major Tanya Degurechaff, Director of Division Y, to His Imperial Majesty !"

I had been briefed on the protocol for the ennoblement ceremony, and had made sure to memorize it by heart. Right now, protocol demanded that I walk down the aisle between the courtiers on each side, and kneel in front of the Imperial Throne. The path wasn't that long, but my legs were small – yet I refused to let that embarrass me. If I could lead Division Y's occultists and Mythos-empowered soldiers, then I could damn well hold my ground in front of a bunch of aristocrats.

I was halfway through when, on my forehead, I felt the skin where Kory had kissed me goodbye when I'd left Castle Schwartzstein burn. The sensation was so sudden, so out of nowhere, that it nearly made me miss a step and fall on my face in front of the entire court – but I caught myself.

Between one step and the next, I closed my eyes and thought. Something was wrong. The burning sensation was increasing, nearly turning into outright pain. Was this some kind of delayed assassination attempt by Being X, who had managed to reach Kory despite the sundering of their link at Bovariastadt and the many wards against extra-dimensional intrusions around Division Y's headquarters ?

Or maybe …

What I did next was a flagrant violation of the military rules of conduct for aerial mages, and of the etiquette expected of any Imperial subject granted the honor of an audience with the Kaiser. If I was wrong, and I got caught, this would be an indelible blemish on my reputation. But I had to risk it, because the consequences of doing nothing if my sudden, seemingly crazed idea turned out to be true were incalculable.

I channelled mana through my eyes. Without a computation orb, it was only a basic spell. Most aerial mages couldn't have done it, as they relied entirely upon their orbs to process their inner mana, but I hadn't been Director of Division Y for years without picking up a few tricks. With how many incidents had happened in the early days after the Denkmaschine had been turned on for the first time, a basic spell of true seeing had been an absolute requirement. I hadn't needed to use one since Arene and my first use of the Kosmosblut, but I hadn't forgotten how to do it, and the spell went off perfectly.

I opened my eyes, no more than a couple of seconds having passed. If I was wrong, then this could be passed off as me being reasonably nervous.

But I wasn't wrong, no matter how much I'd have preferred to be.

Illusions. I was surrounded by illusions. But I sensed, with magical perceptions sharpened by years surrounded by strange magical phenomena, that this wasn't anything like the optic spells used by aerial mages to create decoys during fights. This was more than a bending of light and sound : it was a layer of deceit painted over reality, pieces of the Palace's past plucked out and woven into a cohesive whole.

And, the moment I realized it was here, it shattered with a sound eerily reminiscent of the breaking of the skies above Bovariastadt, dropping me into a scene straight out of the darkest nightmares that had haunted me since realizing I had helped unleash the horrors of the Mythos upon this world.

All around me, where before there had been the courtiers and nobles of the capital, now stood just as many monsters. I recognized some of them from reports I'd read about what had happened in Kemet, when the Albish had broken the seal of the Nameless City. Fiends, we had called them : creations of the Heresiarch which had been petrified to survive the passing of millennia, and which had fed on human flesh as well as that of their own. These horrors had divided in several categories, and the ones I beheld now had several more among them, each more horrid than the last.

One might think that, after witnessing the various types of Werwölfe, I would be inured to such sights. But there was some impossible to define difference between the instances of Projekt W and the Fiends, some ineffable quality that made the creatures surrounding me repulsive in a way even the most unnerving Werwölfe hadn't. I saw masses of tentacles and thorns, wicked wings raising from bulbous skulls with a single, tri-lobed eye; horned, fur-covered beasts with gleaming red eyes, and eldritch glimmering things I could only describe as floating masses of bubbles that glimmered in the light of the chandeliers above us all, and which somehow still managed to broadcast malevolence.

They all stared at me, grinning and drooling, but none – not a single one of them – was making a move toward me. Slowly, afraid of what I was going to find, I turned toward the throne at the end of the chamber. Where the Imperial Family had sat were the same seats I'd seen in the illusion, but damaged and splattered with old bloodstains nobody had bothered to clean.

As for the Kaiser himself, his throne was still there, insultingly pristine compared to the horrors surrounding it. But instead of an ageing but regal monarch, there was a pile of pulsing, twitching meat sitting on it, with a familiar crown perched atop it in what, through the shock and horror, I could only see as a staggeringly poor joke.

This wretched thing had been the Kaiser once, I knew then and there, before something unspeakable had been done to him. I had seen many horrible things working with Division Y, witnessed many gruesome fates in the aftermath of failed experiments, and this matched the very worst of them.

"Impressive," I heard someone call out. I tore my gaze from the obscene sight of my lawful sovereign's mutated, twitching living corpse, and looked at the caller as he came out of the crowd to stand between me and the tainted thrones.

He looked like no one in particular. That wasn't to say he had an ordinary face : he genuinely didn't look like anyone. My brain couldn't hold onto any descriptor when I looked at him. I couldn't tell whether he was tall or small, thin or large, what kind of clothes he was wearing – nothing, beyond the fact that it was a man. I thought back to mere moments ago, trying to think about what I'd seen in the illusions where he'd stood. Had he been hiding as well, or had my eyes merely swept over him without realizing it ? I couldn't tell.

"Hello, Tanya," he said in a voice that was as lacking in distinct features as everything else about him. "This would have been easier on everyone involved if you hadn't detected my illusions … but then, this only proves your value."

The pieces came together in my head, and no matter how horrifying the full picture was, I could not avert my eyes from the truth. The creatures that surrounded us, so similar to the Fiends of the Nameless City. The records I'd read of the Albish Royal Wizard's interview. My own reflections on the implications of the Mythos' existence in this world. Being X's increasing desperation and heavy-handedness in crushing the Empire as Division Y unveiled more and more Wunderwaffen.

"The Albish weren't crazy after all," I breathed out, fighting to stay calm. "They were just looking in the wrong place. It's you. You're the Not-Man that Merlin spoke about. The ancient being whom the Heresiarch served, who keeps popping back up every thousand years."

Now that I faced him myself, I understood now why the medieval people who had fought him a thousand years ago had called this being the 'Not-Man' in their texts. From their perspective, 'like a man, but not' was probably as good a description as they could have come up with.

"Indeed I am," he replied, doing an elaborate, mocking bow. Stunned, it was all I could do to stand here as he went on : "And I have been watching you for a long time, Tanya. When I sensed the touch of the Adversary on your soul, I became curious. I thought you were his instrument, sent on this world to interfere with my purpose. But then I heard your thoughts as you sat in one of his temples of lies. I sensed your hatred of him, hidden under a mask of piety."

I knew of what he spoke. Before being assigned to Division Y and having far too many demands on my time, I had made a habit of visiting a church every few days, to silently curse Being X while in a praying posture so nobody would question it – after all, I'd been raised in a Church orphanage, so everybody had expected me to be as devout as any child could be. In hindsight, it hadn't been the most productive use of my time, but I had been a pre-teen who thought she had been cursed by a devil acting as God. I still thought that now, of course, but I was far more worried about the devil in front of me, who was apparently able to read my mind without me noticing anything was out of the ordinary.

"I had to be careful, of course," the Not-Man continued. "Even if you weren't aligned with him as I first thought, he still had an eye on you. But then, I read that wondrous dissertation of yours, and I realized that, even without revealing myself, I could use you, as a distraction if nothing else."

"You …" I gasped, finally finding my voice again. "You didn't put that ridiculous idea into my head ?"

"I did not," he said, and I swore I could hear a smile in his voice. "You came up with that fascinating concept all on your own – but of course, it wouldn't have worked without me putting my finger on the scales, so to speak. Who do you think approved your transfer to Division Y in the first place ? Who do you think lit up the spark inside the Denkmaschine so that the experiment would succeed ?"

"But why ?" I asked.

Despite how much danger I was in, I really wanted to know the answer. I had spent years wondering why the crackpot theory I had come up with by mixing some concepts I vaguely remembered from an article on artificial intelligence in my previous life while suffering from sleep deprivation had actually worked. Now I knew this was because this entity had interfered, but his motivations yet escaped me – although, judging by the horror he'd made of the Imperial Palace, I doubted they were anything good.

"Because I learned from previous failures," he explained, "and so tried something new, something unprecedented. You used the seed of true knowledge I gave you to build Division Y into the greatest military force on the planet, while I made sure the Adversary couldn't interfere directly."

He gestured toward the throne, where the thing which had once been the Kaiser sat and twitched.

"What did you do to the Kaiser ?" I asked.

"After Schugel was whisked away by the Adversary, I realized I needed a way to keep them from interfering in your work, until you found your footing and built your own protections. But all miracles require sacrifice. So I came to the Kaiser, and made him an offer. He wanted the Empire to become the greatest nation in the world : I made sure that would come to pass."

"I doubt he'd have agreed to *this*," I protested. Not unless there'd been a lot more inbreeding in the Imperial line than I had thought.

"But he did … in a fashion. I told him greatness would come at a cost, but it seems that he thought the cost would be born by other people and not himself."

Ah. A classic deal with the devil, then, though I suspected the Kaiser hadn't even known he was talking with a supernatural being at the time, and any 'agreement' the Not-Man might have extracted from him had been under several layers of deceit. Had the Not-Man *needed* the Kaiser's approval, though, or only pretended to do so ? None of the entities we had encountered before had shown such limitations, but that didn't mean anything. Different entities operated under different rules, and if the Not-Man had once been a human wizard, as Merlin believed, then who knew what restrictions he operated under.

If he did need consent, even fraudulently obtained, though, then that might just give me a chance.

"If you did all of this after the incident at Elenium Arms," I forced myself to continue questioning the Not-Man, "then I take it you've been acting in the Kaiser's stead for years ?"

"Precisely. It wasn't that difficult : all it took was a decree that, with the harsh demands of the war, no aerial mage should be spared for the symbolic duty of guarding the Imperial Palace. Most mages wouldn't have noticed my veils, of course, but I thought it better not to risk it. I took over the court, and used it to pull strings to ensure events proceeded as I desired – and so they have, for we now stand at the threshold of absolute triumph over the Adversary."

It was difficult to tell without any body language to read, but the Not-Man sounded more and more excited as he spoke. I imagined that he'd been waiting for years to explain this to someone who wasn't a flesh-twisted abomination.

"In the Far East and the jungles of South America, my chosen foment chaos and discord, spreading fear and uncertainty," he proclaimed, and part of me couldn't help but think he sounded like a stereotypical anime villain at the moment – but the hellish sights around me kept him from being ridiculous. "All to ensure that the self-proclaimed lords of the world gather here, in this city, within my reach. At long, long last, the victory I have sought for aeons is at hand."

It sounded absurd, like something a conspiracy theorist a hundred years from now would spout out on the Internet in a desperate bid for attention. But I couldn't dismiss it, because I remembered how Being K had manipulated events through time in order to orchestrate its own manifestation – and, unlike the Not-Man, the Dark Mother hadn't truly been sentient, just a blind, idiotic construct following what could best be called its programming.

Given the same achronal capabilities, who knew what an intelligent mind might be capable of ?

But it didn't mean he was invincible, I told myself before panic could take hold. The Dark Mother had been defeated in the end, and if the Not-Man was truly all-knowing and all-powerful, then he wouldn't have been defeated by Being X's agents time and again. If a bunch of Middle-Age warriors could take him, then so could a bunch of soldiers with M-912 rifles.

Unfortunately, I didn't have even one such weapon with me. I was alone, weaponless, and surrounded by Fiends, with my gear and escort left several kilometers across Berun. Which couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

"The court," I asked, still trying to buy time. "They were all important nobles of the Empire. How did you hide their disappearance ?"

"Who said anything about them disappearing ?" he replied.

The Not-Man gestured at a pair of the Fiends, and their bodies began to twist and warp hideously. This wasn't anything like the Werwölfe, whose inhuman selves emerged from extra-dimensional space to wrap themselves around their human cores when they transformed : the flesh of the Fiends was mutating before my eyes, with grotesque sounds of skin tearing and bone breaking until two humans stood in the place of the monsters. They were naked, and there was a look on their faces that told me that those weren't men who had gained the ability to turn into monsters, but monsters who remembered how to take the guise of men.

"As you can see, my minions are perfectly able to go out of the Palace and maintain the pretence of their former lives when necessary, though their lives were already centered around the Court anyway," continued the Not-Man, even as the thought that a bunch of shape-shifting monsters had been running around the Empire's capital for years without being noticed bounced inside my skull.

"But that's enough indulging you and answering your questions, Tanya. It is time for us to get to the business at hand."

I immediately tensed even more, if that were possible. He chuckled, and the sound made the Fiends around us laugh – a monstrous cacophony of shrieks that was still less disturbing than their master's singular chuckle.

"Be not afraid, Tanya. I did not have you come here under completely false pretences. You are truly here to be ennobled, for you have served me well. I planted the seed of truth at the heart of your precious Denkmaschine, true, but it was you who cultivated that seed to bear its manyfold wondrous fruits."

"Why would I serve someone who usurped my lawful monarch ?" I dared to ask.

"Oh, don't pretend you ever held any loyalty to that fool. I looked into your heart, Tanya. I know that you only ever truly cared about yourself. And I gave you what you wanted most : a position in the rear, far from the frontlines. What do you think would have happened without me pulling the strings ? I will tell you. As an aerial mage, you would have been sent to Norden, right as the war went hot and that dear Colonel Sue you've been hosting tore through the Imperial mages to secure the retreat of the Legadonians. What chance do you think you'd have stood as a nine-year-old child against him ?"

That … made a disturbing amount of sense. I wanted to believe the Imperial bureaucracy wouldn't have sent a nine-year-old to the frontlines, but I still remembered the newspapers prior to the Norden Incident. Most people had assumed the conflict with the Entente would peter out in time, once their ruling council got ousted by their own citizens after they realized they couldn't possibly hope to fight the Reich and win.

"I have given you much, and you have given me more in return, though you knew it not. Now is the time for our accord to be made official. And before you think of doing something stupid like refusing, consider your situation. You have no weapon, no allies, no orb. I have made sure of this, because I respect your competence that much. All you have is the body of a twelve-year-old girl, and, well. I don't think this is going to help you much here, do you ?"

He was right. Curse him, but he was right. I could use a few tricks like the true seeing that had shown me the truth, but none of them would let me escape a single Fiend, let alone a horde of them.

I considered playing along. I could kneel, let him put whatever spell he wanted on me, and look for a way to break free later. Division Y had a lot of experience dealing with indoctrination by now : while the Not-Man's methods were undoubtedly different from Being X's, I had worked hard to build safeguards in the Division's protocols against such mind control, which included contingencies for becoming compromised myself.

But … no. No. I couldn't do it. The mere idea of letting anyone control my mind, be they a god or a jumped-up antediluvian warlock, was utterly abhorrent to me. I knew all the contingencies in question, and depending on the mechanics of his control, I might be able to subvert them all.

And he was wrong about one thing, too. I did care about others. Perhaps that hadn't always been the case; perhaps, when he'd violated the privacy of my thoughts years ago, there had been no one besides myself I cared for. But that was no longer the case. There were many people who relied on me, many who had pledged to follow and aid me, and who would be dragged into the Not-Man's influence along with me if I submitted.

I looked up at where his face should be, still unable to see anything my brain could process.

"I am Tanya Degurechaff," I spat. "And I do not kneel !"

And there, suddenly in my hand, I felt the familiar shape of my computation orb, fused to the Nazzadi weapon on their ruined homeworld. I had left it in Visha's care while I went on this trip : the orb I'd handed over at the Palace's entrance was just a standard D-24.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised that the relic weapon had crossed the distance between the military base where my Adjutant and the rest of my escort were stationed and the Imperial Palace just as I needed it most. It was, after all, the same weapon which had slain a dragon and an incarnated godling.

And, unlike everything else Division Y had created, the Nazzadi relic had nothing to do with the Not-Man's interference, which gave me hope that I might just make it out after all.

I immediately went on the offensive, casting a spell to conjure a firestorm around me while preparing a spell to fly up and punch through the roof before calling for help. The Fiends screamed in surprise and pain as a ring of flames erupted around me, instinctively recoiling from me.

But, through the fire, I saw that the Not-Man hadn't moved at all, completely untouched by the raging inferno around him. Instead, he raised a hand, and tendrils of black smoke erupted from it, wrapping themselves around me and instantly cutting off my access to mana. I fell back to the ground, my flying spell interrupted, and he strode toward me as the flames died down.

As he loomed over me, the tendrils binding me forced my head up so that I looked directly at him. For the first time, I was able to register one of his features : a wide, grinning smile.

"You're even more dangerous than I expected," he said, and the smile didn't move when he spoke. "But such petty tricks won't work against me, Major. Even that cane of yours won't save you, not from me. If you had access to your little elixir, perhaps you might be a threat, but I made sure that option wasn't available to you, didn't I ?"

"The Grandmother," I gasped in sudden pain as my bindings tightened around me. "She –"

"She made sure you were still too weak to challenge me," the Not-Man finished. "Just as I ordered her to."

I opened my mouth, not knowing what I was going to say, but more tendrils wrapped themselves around my face, gagging and blinding me – yet still, I could hear the Not-Man's

mocking voice, which I realized only now wasn't a voice at all, anymore than he – *it* – was a man.

"You will join the ranks of my servants whether you want it or not," the entity gloated. "And when the petty kings of this age gather in a few days, you will go to them, and they will welcome you, so that you might bind them to my will in turn. I will build my rule from the shadows until none remain who can oppose me; then and only then shall I step into the light and set alight the pyres whose fires will awaken my masters and guide them to this miserable mud ball."

"It is inevitable, and your defiance will change *nothing*."

Pain overwhelmed me. Darkness engulfed me. And then –

Nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT TIME :

They are themselves but they are also me.

# Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"I look back on what I thought was my faith in the lies of the Church with a mix of bemusement, disgust and hatred. It is almost impossible to comprehend such naiveté, such wilful blindness, and yet I know it was not so long ago that I was but another of the Adversary's blinkered sheep.*

*Now, however, my eyes have been opened. And so, in challenge to the Adversary's prophets of old, I too shall put the revelations I've been granted into writing.*

*When I first saw the Master, I did not realize that I was in the presence of divinity. How could I, with my feeble mortal eyes, comprehend the truth ? Yet even then, I knew he was more than he seemed.*

*He came to the Imperial Palace in the guise of a mortal man, but even that lowly form could not fully conceal his glory. He walked through the doors, and none thought to stop him, until he came to the room where the one we then thought supreme held court.*

*I do not recall exactly why we were all gathered at the time. Something about the war, no doubt, but it doesn't matter. What I recall with perfect clarity, however, is when the doors opened to reveal the Master, and we all fell to our knees before him.*

*Then he spoke, and revealed unto us the truth of Creation. His words burrowed into our skulls, digging into the barriers of lies and ignorance that had grown there over our entire lives. He taught us of the True Gods, from whom all the worlds were born, before the Adversary usurped their place as rightful sovereigns of Creation. He taught us of the long war he had waged against this cowardly demiurge and his cohorts, to break the seals of lies and awaken the True Gods from their long slumber, so that Mankind might reclaim its place as their favored servants.*

*His words were more than mere sounds : they carried with them the truth of themselves, each showing us glimpses of that antediluvian epoch when the True Gods ruled over the cosmos. The pain was immense as he shared these visions with us, and I, like many others, ran. My pitiful mind could not withstand the sight of such magnificence, and I returned to my basest, bestial instincts as I sought to flee from what I did not understand.*

*But instead of smiting me and the other cowards for our unworthiness, the Master was merciful. With a mere gesture, he sealed the doors and locked us all in the throneroom with him, preventing us from escaping until we had all learned what he had to tell us. As we beat our fists bloody against the great wood panels, he continued speaking, until at last he was done, and we were each and everyone of us his loyal vassals, now and forever.*

*Then, and only then, did he shed his mortal guise and let us behold him in his true glory, letting us know the true nature of the being we now served. And we fell to our knees,*

*screamed our prayers, and made sacrifices of those too weak to stop us."*

*"For all his power and glory, the Master must still act in secret, lest the minions of the Adversary strike him down with their cowardly tricks. To that end, today, the Master wove a great working around the Palace, to keep the rabble from realizing what great things are taking place within these hallowed walls, as well as to ensure none would question what happened to the servants, or why we remain within the Palace for so much longer than before.*

*This working used the Kaiser and his bloodline as reagents, their ties to the Empire turned into strings from which the Master wove the veil that shall hide his works. We watched in rapture as he unravelled them all, leaving only a remnant of the Kaiser to sit upon his throne – which the Master now uses as a vector to assume the aspect of this mortal sovereign in order to deceive the rest of the Empire, until the day comes when the truth can be revealed and all kneel before him in joyful worship."*

*"Tomorrow, we will at long last shed our human shells. The preparations for the Rite of Transfiguration are complete. Moving in secrecy, we've procured the reagents the Master requires, while those of us blessed with the required level of magical power have been taught the steps of the rite.*

*A great pit has been dug, displacing the useless flowers and rare trees which the Imperial Family collected for so long, and a complex arcane circle traced around it using powdered jewels from the royal vaults. There, under the light of the full moon, we shall be brought into a new existence.*

*I tremble with anticipation as I write these words. The Master told us that the Rite will liberate us from the weak forms the machinations of the Adversary entrapped our essence within, remaking our bodies into shapes fitting for the service of the True Gods.*

*The thought of all that was robbed from us, and our ancestors before us for countless generations, because of the Adversary's manipulations, fills me with righteous fury. But for all his deceit, soon the truth shall be revealed, and their schemes come undone.*

*I cannot wait."*

*"It is difficult to write, for these weak, mortal hands are no longer my own, and merely looking at them as I write these words fills me with disgust for the weak, feeble creature I once was.*

*Ten days ago, the Rite of Transfiguration took place. I, along with the rest of the court, laid in the great pit, naked save for the runes cut into my skin. I dimly remember that the pain of them bothered me at the time – yet another mark of how pathetic I was then, for such pain was nothing compared to what came next.*

*Under the Master's guidance, his acolytes sang, and bent the laws of the cosmos to his will. For three days, I was bathed in the primordial energies of the universe. I was blessed with visions of cosmic power, even as my frail body writhed and screamed in abject agony.*

*To my shame, I begged for it to end, before the last anchors of my world-view finally shattered and I was reborn, purified in the eyes of the True Gods. My body followed suit, becoming a bloody chrysalis that burst apart to reveal my new, glorious form. I awoke surrounded by my fellows, who had been transfigured as I had. We revelled under the night sky, listening to the Master's sermons while feasting on the flesh of the mages who'd performed the ritual, their life burned out to fuel our transfiguration.*

*Even now, the memories of that time of trial are fading, for even transformed as I am now, I cannot hold such truths into my mind – yet I know with absolute certainty that their mark shall remain forever upon me, a testament to the blessing I have received.*

*I find it difficult to think of the weakling man who wrote in this journal before as myself. His thoughts, his worries and fears, seem so small and meaningless to me now. That is why it took me so long before I could force my glorious new form to reshape itself into my previous appearance – and I am still ahead of many of my brethren, who have yet to manage it. The Master himself took notice of how quickly I achieved this, and I shall treasure the memory of his approving nod for the rest of my existence, which is now no longer constrained by the limited lifespan the Adversary put upon Mankind in order to limit its potential and keep it from becoming a threat to his reign."*

*"Today I had to go out again to procure meat for the court. I was tempted to devour the fat merchant who bought the meat for us, but I held back. Alexander devoured a vagrant last week, and for his crime of risking the Circle's exposure, the Master made an example of him.*

*Though it has been several moons since we were reborn, many of us still struggle with assuming our previous, lesser shape, but I am honored to be among those who manage it the best, and for that I was chosen for this role."*

*"News have reached us of the lesser creatures which fight in the Empire's name. The Master has told us that these beings have been kept in ignorance of the purpose they truly serve, so that the Adversary may not pry His secrets from their minds as they wage war against is pawns.*

*I both pity and envy these beings, for while they are kept ignorant of the glory they serve, they are able to fight the minions of the Adversary, whereas we must wait within the Palace."*

*"A great victory has been won. In the distant East, the entire capital of the Russy Federation has been turned into a bloody sacrifice to the True Gods. This, the Master told us, is another sign that the end of the Adversary's reign over the world is nigh.*

*Mortals call it the Solstice Event, as if mere words can encapsulate something of such magnitude. But their ignorance matters little. Soon, their eyes shall be opened."*

*"For the first time since his arrival, the Master has left the Palace. Before leaving, he told us that the Solstice Event has awakened some of his old servants, freeing them from the slumber in which they were cast by the slaves of the Adversary. Now that they are free, he must rally them to his banner once more, giving them the orders that will set in motion our ultimate victory over the Adversary.*

*There is ... disquiet, in the Palace, without the Master's presence. But we shall endure."*

*"The Master has returned. His absence was a trial, for we had all grown so used to basking in his magnificence. Without him to suppress our new instincts with his unquestioned authority, the practice of duels re-emerged, and despite our regenerative abilities, several of us ended up dead. I, myself, killed and fed upon one of my fellows, who had once been married to a distant relative of mine.*

*When he learned of this, the Master was not displeased, much to the contrary. He told us that this was the natural way of things, long concealed by civilization's false pretences; that those who had died had proven unworthy of serving the True Gods."*

*"The Master tells us that soon, our wait will be at an end. His chosen will come to him soon, to bend the knee before him and carry his word into the rest of the world.*

*We have all heard of her, of course. Her deeds have echoed across the aether and social fabric alike. She is powerful, though the Master kept her ignorant of her role in his plans.*

*Soon. I can barely keep myself from drooling on these pages at the thought. My flesh shivers in hungry anticipation, yet I must contain myself just one little bit longer.*

*Soon, we will be unleashed, no longer needing to hide, free to indulge our sacred hungers. The mortals shall behold our glory, and the sound of their screams shall be the orchestra which heralds the True Gods' return. Those who are worthy shall join us, transfigured into servants of the True Gods. Mages shall be turned into priests, carrying out the rites by which frail human clay is remade into something purer.*

*Soon."*

Extracts from the personal journal of Ambrosius Drachencraft, courtier at the Imperial Court, recovered from the ruins of the Imperial Palace.

---

*September 3rd, 1926 – Castle Schwartzstein*

In the courtyard of the castle, a bunch of children were playing, under the watchful gaze of their caretakers. The sun was high in the sky, warming the stones under their feet as two dozen children ran around, laughing and shouting at each other. If an adult had asked them what game it was exactly they were playing, each child would have had a different answer, each of them beyond the ability of an adult to understand – as was only right and proper.

One child, however, stood away from the rest. And, though it was in the nature of children to be self-centered and selfish, these were no ordinary children. One of them, a boy with red eyes and skin black as coal, left the group, running to the side of his friend.

"Kory ?" Vreta asked. "What's wrong ?"

The Counterfeit Saint, whose name had been given to her by that very boy, was looking into the distance at something only she could see, and tears were running down her cheeks.

"Tanya is hurting," she whispered. "The bad man has her, just like the bad men had me be-before. He's hurting her, and he wants to break her, and – and –"

She started shaking, sobbing, and Vreta immediately pulled her into a hug, holding her tight even as he fought his own rising panic. To the Nazzadi child, the idea that anything could threaten Tanya seemed impossible. Though he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he knew she had killed Akhar-Zegog, the monster which had hunted the Nazzadi for as long as anyone remembered. But he also knew that Kory had seen Tanya fight other things than the Devourer of Hope, and he knew that she wouldn't lie about something so important – in fact, she had never lied about anything in the time Vreta had known her, not even the small, inoffensive lies children tell all the time.

Holding his friend tight, Vreta fell back to the lessons of his childhood, to the ways his people had followed for more generations than anyone now remembered. When monsters came, the children's job was to hide and wait for the adults to deal with the situation. And, if the children saw the monsters first, then they had to warn the adults.

"Let's go find Miss Elya," he suggested.

Before coming to the Empire, the Nazzadi had had no concept of prayer. The necessities of survival, and the bleakness of their situation on Nazza-Duhni, had erased any faith or belief system their ancestors might have held before the cataclysm which had ended their world.

But in the months since, the Nazzadi had learned many things from their Imperial hosts, including the concept of the Church and the faith most in the Empire – and the Division too, despite or perhaps because of the nature of their work – believed in. Getting the concept across the language barrier had been difficult, but the linguists had managed it in the end.

And so, as Vreta gently led his trembling, scared friend toward their caretaker, the boy found himself silently wishing that Tanya would be okay, hoping that someone, anyone would listen.

---

*"I don't care about military regulations ! The Director's orb just vanished, and it wouldn't do that unless she was in danger !*

*... No, you aren't cleared to know how, why, or what that means ! All you need to know is that this is Division Y business, and that it's of vital importance that I get to her side immediately !*

*... I know she is in the Imperial Palace ! Why do you think I'm insisting so much ?! If she is in danger, then the entire Imperial Family is at risk !*

*... Just you try shooting us down, if you think you'll have better luck than the Progeny ! Serebryakov out !"*

Communication from Lieutenant Viktoriya Ivanovna Serebryakov to Berun Airspace Command, September 3rd, 1926.

---

*??????????? – ???????????*

Darkness. And then, light, weak and flickering, as awareness returns.

There is pain, steadily growing at the edge of my senses. A pressure, like claws weighing against skin at the very threshold of piercing through, as the will of a thing pretending to be a man tries to break in from the outside.

But it cannot. Not yet. I won't let it, and for now, my will is enough.

I am bound in great chains of shadow, unable to move, to act, to speak. Able only to watch, to listen, and to wait.

I sense great panes of sorcery beyond the edges of my prison, hiding it from view. On them, I can feel the oily touch of the architect of my imprisonment, painted with the Kaiser's endless agony. This, then, is how the presence of this malignant corruption at the Empire's heart was concealed for so long.

I watch as four figures gather before me, in the small circle of light that is all I can create in my diminished state. The Lonely Boy, who cannot understand others and strives for excellence in all things because he believes he must, achieving great results yet discarding every pursuit when he realizes he will never reach the top. The Salaryman, who found what he believes to be the answer to all his questions and uncertainties and applies it to everything, even as this focus pushes aside others. The Orphaned Girl, who seeks a life well lived as revenge against a capricious demiurge. And the Director, who has learned truths both eldritch and mundane the other three never so much as glimpsed.

These four are there but not there, for this place is not really a place. It is the construct of a fractured soul, the representation of a mind that has never been what most would consider normal. They are aspects of a singular existence, reflections cast by a single light through the prism of time.

They are themselves, but they are also me. But where I am bound by the arcane chains wrapped around me, they are free – free to move, to act, to speak, if only here, in this liminal space. For the chains were meant for me alone, and their maker didn't realize there was more than I to myself.

Silently, I listen to them speak. Though it looks like a conversation, it isn't : it is merely a succession of thoughts, voiced by each of the four in turn.

"The Kaiser is dead," whispers the Orphaned Girl. "We'll never be a knight now."

"No," refutes the Salaryman. "His fate is much worse than that, I fear."

"And ours won't be much better," says the Director. "We don't have much time."

"What can we do ?" asks the Lonely Boy, gesturing at the darkness around them.

"The wards kept our use of the Nazzadi orb from being detected, but Visha will have noticed the weapon's disappearance," says the Director. "She is coming to help us."

"Have you forgotten ? There is running water all around this place," the Salaryman points out.

"Somehow, I don't think she will let that stop her," smiles the Director.

"Alright, maybe," the Salaryman concedes. "But what can she do ?"

"That's the rub, isn't it," the Director frowns. "Endlose Nacht might give her an edge, but she doesn't have a dose with her. And even with it, the Not-Man is something unlike anything we've encountered before."

"I don't think he's stronger than the Dark Mother when it comes to raw power, but if he was behind the Heresiarch in Kemet, then we've to assume he's stronger than that old mummy was, and it took Weiss being supported by the Ritual of Correspondence to take that one down," the Lonely Boy thinks out loud.

"Based on what we've learned, it's clear now that we've only ever been a pawn in the rivalry between the Not-Man and Being X," the Orphaned Girl picks up the thread of thought, sneering as she speaks the name of her tormentor. "Unless Being X was actually fucking Nyarlathotep in disguise, playing both sides all along, but given the references to the 'Adversary', and what happened in Remula, I think we can safely discard that theory."

"Especially since, if it's true, then we are doomed anyway," the Salaryman throws in.

"So we have been a pawn for our entire second life," the Director scowls, before her eyes suddenly widen. "But when a pawn reaches the other side of the chessboard …"

"… it becomes a queen," finishes the Orphaned Girl, scowling. "We know. We have all played chess. But a queen is still a piece."

"Actually," says the Director with a bloodthirsty smile, "I was thinking that it is in the perfect position to jump off the board and cut the enemy player's throat."

There is a pause, as the other three consider the words of their newest kindred. Then, the Salaryman chuckles.

"I see where you are going with this," he says. "If you are correct, this might be our only chance."

"This might also kill us," the Orphaned Girl says. Out of the four, she's the one who sounds most apprehensive about the notion, for she fears and hates the afterlife's guardian in equal measure. "Even now, we know very little about how this all works."

"It might," the Director admits. "But the alternative is becoming a slave to an eldritch horror who'll use us to bring doom to the world, and I think we're all in agreement that's much, much worse ?"

The other three nod with various degrees of reluctance.

"Well, if we are to die, we might as well do it with style," the Salaryman sighs. Out of the four, he alone experienced death, and the idea of facing that awful moment of total impotence as something large and unstoppable approaches to crush him frightens him more than he lets on.

Defiance, even futile, is better than meekly waiting for the inevitable. In this, we are all in agreement.

And then, one by one, they disappear. First the Lonely Boy; then the Salaryman; then the Orphaned Girl; and finally, the Director, who looks up at me as she fades away.

"Don't fuck this up," she tells me – I tell myself.

And then she too is gone, and there is only me, because there was ever only me here. The pieces of myself come together, different perspectives becoming one at long, long last. I reclaim the fullness of my strength, and with it, I break the chains woven by another of the chessboard's pawns.

On one level, I feel myself physically straining against the links; on another, I break the complex, eldritch spell formula that suppressed the effects of the Kosmosblut. Both are real, and both are illusions. Truth and metaphor are fluid and inconsistent things here, where the dreams of a twice-born soul meet the thoughts of a nascent godling.

One by one, my bindings break, each one sending a shockwave that batters the obfuscating panes, causing cracks to appear and spread with each blow. When the last of my chains is broken, so too are the concealing walls, and I smile at the knowledge that, no matter what happens next, the plans of my enemy have been brought to ruin by this alone.

And I awaken.

---

*September 3rd, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Imperial Palace*

I opened my eyes, and the shadowy tendrils that bound me burned in silver fire as power coursed through my body, reshaping my human shell into the towering form of the Lady of Stars. This time, there was no need for a Kosmosblut injection : the power was inside me all along, kept sealed by the spell the Grandmother had cast on me when she'd found me, hurt and confused, in the ruins of Moskva.

I stood up, summoning my orb to my hand. Inside my palm, the cane immediately shifted into the Moonlight Blade, casting its pale light onto my dreadful surroundings.

The Fiends recoiled from the radiance, shocked, hissing and snarling in pain and fear. They cowered in the shadows of the defiled throneroom, but the darkness was no shield against my gaze. Unlike the Werwölfe, who appeared either entirely human or completely alien, the Fiends showed a variety of in-between states, with limbs and faces replaced with those of their monstrous aspects, creating chimeras that somehow looked even worse than their fully transformed self.

I looked deeper, and saw their true nature, warped and evil, nothing left of the humans from which they had been created except the meanest echo, just enough for them to play the part. Perhaps, I thought grimly, enough for them to believe they were the same being transformed, rather than a beast that had killed and replaced whatever Imperial courtier had spawned them in their final, agonized moments.

I would have wept for them, had I not walked amidst the trenches of the Rhine, and beheld the ruination of Nazza-Duhni and Moskva. Compared to such horror, the death and damnation of a bunch of noblemen who had been born to wealth and privilege the likes of which the orphans I'd grown up with couldn't imagine was a small thing.

My perceptions extended beyond the room, past the wards which had shielded the Imperial Palace for so long, only to be shattered by my transformation. I sensed a clutch of familiar presences approaching, moving through the air at great speed, and knew that my companions hadn't abandoned me.

Further away, I could feel the thousands of souls who had been touched by the Lady of Stars. In Arene, in Bovariastadt, in the east where the Allied Forces still dwelled. A faith, not in a singular deity, but in the inherent potential and goodness of Humanity, in the strength of unity against the darkness. Yet I felt too the seeds of worship, and knew that I would have to attend these soon, lest I become the very thing I was so repulsed by.

But this was a matter for latter, if there was such a thing for me. I recentred my perceptions to my immediate surroundings, and focused them on the creature which stood before me, unafraid of me yet clearly not unaffected by my transformation.

"What a surprise," hissed the Not-Man. "I see that woman couldn't do anything right."

"The Grandmother did what you told her to do," I chided. "It is a poor craftsman who blames his tools."

He snarled, making a sound like a priceless painting being torn to shreds by someone who knew its importance and simply did not care. I saw then that it was not a man, and had never been a man. Such was merely the form the minds cursed with beholding it were putting on it in order to bear such an awful sight.

I looked up the temporal thread of its existence, and to my shock, I found that this creature, this being which had brought corruption and ruin to the heart of the Empire, was not much older than my own human body in this world. It had come into existence not as a babe possessed by an ancient spirit, but instead had appeared out of thin air, fully grown, to walk the lands of the Empire.

I looked further back into the past of a thousand years ago. There, I saw it – no. Not it. Another one, just like it, impossibly similar, but not the same. I saw it appear out of nowhere too, gather followers and turn them into monsters, before being hunted down and destroyed by an army of holy warriors, whose priests then set to work erasing all traces of its existence – only for one journal to escape them, and find its way to the Royal Wizard of the Allied Kingdom ten centuries later.

I looked even further back, following what I'd first thought to be echoes but now understood to be a pattern that had repeated itself for aeons. Again, I saw another version of the Not-Man appear, only to be stopped by those who thought themselves divinely chosen, but were in truth instruments of the entity I knew as Being X. Again, and again, and again, and again, and again; an endless procession throughout the ages of the world, stretching all across the globe. In Europa, in Kemet, in the Far East and the Americas and everywhere human beings had attempted to build civilizations, the Not-Man had appeared at some point. Every instance doing the same thing, over and over, never learning from the past – each acting exactly as if it were the first, even as their adversaries grew wise to their methods and tricks.

I saw the truth, then, and I laughed. Despite the cosmic implications of this revelation, I couldn't help it – it was all just so monstrously ridiculous.

"Have you finally gone mad, child ?" it mocked me. "Or is it despair from understanding your situation ?"

"I see you for what you are," I taunted it.

"I am the prophet of the True Gods," it proclaimed. "The harbinger and architect of their return !"

"No," I denied it. "You are not. You are not the herald of the Great Old Ones, tirelessly working in the shadows to usher in their return, reincarnated every time you are slain. You aren't even their alarm clock, waking them up when the stars are right, or even their ring tone. You are nothing more than the electrical impulse coursing through the clock just before it rings, and the Adversary has been hitting snooze every time one of you pops up for untold aeons !"

Alright, maybe I was stretching the metaphor somewhat. But I couldn't help myself. It was all just so wonderfully absurd ! Even that poor soul Lovecraft would have smiled, I believed, had he realized what the equivalent of Nyarlathotep actually was in this world, compared to the all-powerful, wicked deity he had painted in his works.

And I had another reason to win now, I belatedly realised. Being X had managed to deal with creatures like this one for thousands of years, and my pride wouldn't tolerate failing where this hack had succeeded for so long.

Petty ? Perhaps. But so long as it helped me win, I would take motivation from wherever it came.

"You didn't go to the Grandmother for help before the Solstice Event because you didn't know she existed," I pressed on, trying to anger the Not-Man to the point it made a mistake – unlikely, given its eldritch nature, but you never knew, and besides, it had spent decades walking among humans, so maybe it had picked up some of their bad habits. "Until the Heresiarch woke up in Kemet, you had no idea there were still remnants of your predecessors' attempts at destroying the world left."

"Do you think it matters ? You don't have the Adversary's power behind you," it spat. "Your power originates from me and me alone. Do you really think you can defeat me with it ?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But neither do you, isn't that right ? Why else would you have the Grandmother seal my transformation before revealing yourself ?"

It shrieked in rage and frustration, and shed the bare pretence of humanity in which it had cloaked itself, shifting its true nature so that it became visible in three-dimensional space. As it did so, it seemed to grow, matching my own transformed stature – though in truth, it was merely changing the dimensional alignment of its being, bringing more of itself into what humans thought of as reality.

The shape it took was beyond the human brain to fully grasp, but I was so much more than that now. It had a humanoid basis, with three arms which ended in clawed hands (the fact each of them had the familiar five fingers was, perhaps, the most disturbing thing about the whole nightmare). Black tentacles erupted from its torso in an asymmetric pattern, each covered in eyes with slitted irises and mouths with black tongues and too many teeth. Where its head should be was another tendril, and a mouth that moved in ways no orifice designed by nature ever should.

It was, to put it bluntly, a vision of nightmare, one fit to drive any human seeing it running in terror.

I rushed at it with my Moonlight Blade held high. The weapon came down, only to be parried by something which shrouded itself in the guise of a sword whose blade was covered in a coating of human teeth, which burst into dust at the impact, revealing a metal underneath that I knew at a glance had been forged in a place where the laws of reality were very different from the ones I was used to.

But I saw, too, that the blade wasn't meant to be a weapon, just a tool, like an instrument attached to one of the robots we'd sent to Mars in my old world, repurposed for a violent purpose it hadn't been designed for. It had other such tools, kept hidden in other-dimensional space, meant to assist it with the goal for which it had been created, each more advanced than anything ever produced by Division Y or the Nazzadi people at the height of their power and knowledge.

But even the most advanced combat drone can be taken out of commission if you smash it with a big enough rock, and the Moonlight Blade was a very big, very sharp rock.

I disengaged, and struck again, and again, before needing to dodge the Not-Man's own blow. Seeing an opening, I let loose a stream of energy from my left hand. It moved out of the way, but hitting it hadn't been my objective : the attack spell struck the living throne, where the Kaiser and his wife had been bound into deathless torment, incinerating them both and freeing them from their suffering.

I felt the tottering remnants of the wards the Not-Man had woven around the Imperial Palace collapse completely with the destruction of their last anchor, as did their architect. It shrieked, in frustration and rage.

**"Very well,"** it said, with words that made the Fiends around us howl in psychic agony. **"If the subtle path has failed, then brute force will have to do ! I shall break you, and then do the same to all the others in this miserable pile of rocks you call a city, before going**

**on to do the same to the rest of this world ! Even if you defy me now, it doesn't matter : you've already fulfilled the greater part of your purpose, and removed the Adversary's servants from the board !"**

Wings made of panes of dead space stitched together with blood-red, squirming worms unfurled from its back, and it leapt upward. I flew in pursuit, and together, we burst out of the Imperial Palace's roof, crashing through the beautiful architecture and emerging to find the sky consumed by the alien stars and giant moon I had brought with me.

This time, however, the eldritch sky was struggling to manifest itself. Unlike what had happened in Arene, Bovariastadt and Moskva, the image looked like an illusion cast by a defective computation orb, flickering in and out of existence – a representation of my own battle against the Not-Man.

We briefly struggled like a pair of nightmarish eldritch wrestlers, before separating and hovering in the air, facing one another. In the distance, I began to hear the city's screams as Berun's population saw us and reacted with perfectly understandable panic. But, much as I lamented the damage this battle would inflict on the psyche of the Beriners, I couldn't spare any attention for them.

Because, no matter how much I'd insulted and demeaned it, openly and in my thoughts, the Not-Man was still a terribly dangerous opponent. Unlike what I had feared, though its true form existed in more than three dimensions, it wasn't an achronal being : its plotting was as bound by the laws of causality as any human being. But it was still a creation of the entities which had crafted the likes of the Dark Mother as nothing more than tools.

I didn't know whether I could win this battle, but I knew that, at the very least, I could fight. And, for now, that was enough.

The time for words, for taunts and insults, had passed. Now, all that was left was for one of us to kill the other.

---

*"And I heard, as it were, the sound of thunder,*

*A distant voice saying : 'Come and see'.*

*My vision was transported as if on a bird flying across the Fatherland, and I saw.*

*And beheld a great beast of shadow, atop whose head was set a crown of lies, and beneath whose hooves laid the ruins of Empire.*

*I knew fear, then, for I knew in my heart of hearts that this Beast heralded the end of Mankind's dominion upon the world,*

*Until I saw too the star-born figure which fought it, and recognized the Lady of Stars, she who had brought deliverance to our benighted city.*

*And the heavens were rent asunder by the force of their battle, revealing the selfsame moon and stars that have become so familiar to us all.*

*And beneath the two warring godlings came the hosts of their champions in all their glory and horror.*

*I saw a duchess of ice, wielding the promise of the final ending.*

*I saw a girl, with skin dark as the starless night and eyes red as blood.*

*I saw a man with an arm forged of metal, striking with a blade forged of purest moonlight.*

*I saw a tamed wolf turned shepherd dog, his savagery turned to Humanity's protection.*

*I saw ordinary men, holding in their hands the power of stolen lightning.*

*And I saw, too, the horde of fiends that poured from the dark to face them.*

*I watched, dread battling hope in my soul as surely as champions and monsters did battle before me."*

From the Testament of Dominique, written in Bovariastadt on September 4th, 1926.

---

*"The first thing I heard was the explosion. I thought this was some kind of terrorist attack on the Palace itself. We had been warned to be extra watchful, what with so many foreign officials in the city for the conference, but nobody thought anything would happen here. I mean, if anyone was going to do anything, it would have to be closer to the actual conference, right ? Not here, at one of the bridges leading to the Palace.*

*So when I heard the noise, I thought I was dreaming at first. I turned to find where it was coming from, and saw the roof of the Imperial Palace explode, sending debris everywhere with enough strength that some of it slammed into the ground next to me – it was only blind luck that I wasn't hit.*

*Then I saw the Beast rise from the roof, and the Lady who pursued it into the sky. And I knew I wasn't dreaming, no matter how much I might prefer to be.*

*They fought with bursts of magic greater than anything I'd ever seen, and every blow inflicted more damage on the Palace beneath, while other wild shots went into the water, sending great waves and creating gouts of steam.*

*Then, as if things weren't bad enough already, monsters began to pour out of the ruined palace, things that looked as if they'd come straight from Hell, howling and shrieking and making noises I don't have the words to describe. I froze in place, like the rest of my buddies, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.*

*Then the people from Division Y came, plunging from the sky like Heavens' own terrible angels arriving to save us. The fliers dropped men with glowing rifles, and a young soldier in a Lieutenant's uniform who didn't carry any weapon, but turned into a big monster who still*

*looked a lot better than the monsters. Without hesitation, they started to fight, and God help me, I raised my rifle and started firing.*

*It didn't do anything. Most of my shots hit : I wasn't selected to guard the Palace because my marksmanship scores were low, and the mass of monsters was so thick it would've been harder not to hit something. But when the bullets pierced through their … skin, the wounds disappeared almost immediately.*

*Still, I kept firing. Because … well, what else was I going to do ? Run ?*

*With all due respect, fuck that. I am still a soldier of the Imperial Army, even if … even if I failed in my duty of protecting the Palace in the most grievous fashion imaginable."*

From the testimony of Private Gottfried, survivor of the Defense of the Schlossbrücke, recorded on September 9th, 1926.

---

*September 3rd, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun – Imperial Palace*

Under the silver light of an alien moon, the skies of Berun were burning as titans duelled. Lightning arced as they clashed against one another, and the earth shuddered in sympathy with every blow.

Captain Johann-Mattäus Weiss fought with a strange detachment, as if his mind refused to process the implications of what his senses were telling him, letting his battle-instincts take over instead.

Objectively speaking, what was happening was not any worse than what he'd seen at Moskva. The monsters they were facing were similar to those the Southern Expedition had battled in the defense of Kheriaha, and the great horror the Lady was duelling was no more terrible than the Dark Mother at first glance.

But this was *Berun*. This was the Imperial Palace. It was supposed to be *safe*. The whole reason the Imperial Army had fought for so long was to keep the Fatherland safe, and the Palace was the Fatherland's heart, no matter how much its political influence had diminished in recent years.

And now, it was gone. Reduced to ruins, from which poured a tide of flesh-devouring monstrosities. The nightmares Division Y had worked so hard to contain were here, and millions were at risk.

No. No, he would not accept it. The horrors of Moskva would not repeat themselves here. He would not allow it.

Weiss screamed as he fought, his orichalcum arm blazing with power as he conjured a mage blade more powerful than anything he'd ever manifested. The Fiends hurled themselves at him as he hovered close to the ground – far closer than any self-respecting aerial mage should, but with the Lady of Stars fighting overhead, this was where he could do the most good without getting in the way.

Around him, the rest of the Director's escort were fighting too. Sergeant Barchet was leading his squad's fire, shooting into the mob of Fiends with their M-912 rifles. Grantz was there, tearing into monstrous flesh with eldritch claws. Entire packs of Fiends were frozen solid by Serebryakov, and Zerayah danced in the air between ranged attacks.

*The war was supposed to be over,* a small, distant part of him thought as he kept killing monsters. *There isn't anyone left to fight.*

*So who did this ?*

---

The monster in Grantz's mind howled as he fought the Fiends. Thanks to the years he'd spent as a Werwolf, Grantz could make out the mix of hatred for the Fiends, respect for the Lady of Stars, and utter terror toward her opponent his symbiote felt at the moment.

He didn't have a pack of his brethren with him this time, and that wasn't helping with the symbiote's feelings. The Director had brought only one Werwolf with her to the capital, as part of her wish to avoid frightening the other delegates with a blatant show of force. It had been a great honor to be selected for this duty : as a Phantom-type, Grantz was far from the most powerful of Projekt W's creations. But he was one of the first and most experienced, as well as, apparently, charismatic enough to look good at the conference.

They had all been warned to be on their best behavior, while also being vigilant for any attempt at sabotaging the conference or steal secrets. But even the Director's worst-case scenario failed to measure up to what was happening now.

He fought with organic blades, with beams of energy and tentacles. He fought with every trick he had learned, every bit of strength he could muster. Behind him, the Division Y troopers were firing into the horde, along with the poor bastards who'd the bad luck of being assigned to guard the bridge today. That they hadn't turned and run was a testament to their courage, and Grantz hoped they would survive this day.

Something he wasn't sure he would be able to. There were dozens of Fiends pushing toward the bridge, with more emerging from the ruins of the Imperial Palace. Lesser entities were manifesting as well, minor manifestations of the Mythos slipping through the cracks in reality caused by the clash of the two godlings above. They were little more than vermin to the Division Y personnel, the kind of beasts routinely purged by patrols in Castle Schwartzstein, but they were a distraction the handful of defenders couldn't afford.

No matter, Grantz decided. He wouldn't fall back, and he wouldn't fail. He had gone through too much to die here, with the end of the war in sight.

So he drew on that determination, on his sense of duty, on his instinctive hatred for the Fiends, on his anger and sorrow for all that he had witnessed – and he kept fighting, even as claws and fangs and other things tore into his flesh.

And, as Grantz kept fighting underneath the light of the Lady of Stars and the horrid Beast she was duelling, he began to change. It started in the depths of his being, where the mortal man and the Mythos being met. Covered in Fiend blood, surrounded on all sides, Grantz and

the monster within were more in synch than ever before, and the line between the two of them faded more and more, until, in the madness of this awful battle, it disappeared completely.

Such was the confusion of the battle, nobody noticed it at first. The Phantom-type Werwolf grew, matching the largest Fiends in size, while his claws lengthened and became even sharper and more vicious. His hide paled, going from a fleshy pink to bone-white – or, perhaps, *moon*-white. The blades which grew from his wrists thickened and lengthened, cutting through Fiendish flesh even more effectively than before, propelled by increased strength.

Yet these changes were nothing compared to the gift which revealed itself when something large and fast slammed into Grantz. The impact should have born him to the ground, yet he remained unmoving, while the Fiend which had body-checked him ripped apart, the entire kinetic energy of its charge redirected into it.

He blinked with all five of his white, pupil-less eyes. Then, with barely an instant of pause, Grantz kept killing Fiends, wielding his new abilities with the same instinctual ease as right after he'd undergone the Rite of Union, in what might as well have been another life.

---

Zerayah's mage blade punched through the skull of something with too many eyes, and she threw the twitching corpse into the path of a towering cyclops with mana-enhanced strength.

Every enhancement spell her orb could support was coursing through her body at the moment. She moved with preternatural speed, the movements of the monsters around her seeming slow and sluggish to her accelerated perceptions.

She tore through the Fiends like a living storm, matching Weiss' own carnage. The Imperial-born mage had more raw power available, and could channel it more effectively thanks to his orichalcum arm, but Zerayah was a Nazzadi, who had reached adulthood on her people's death-world.

To a Nazzadi, fighting like this was a dream come true. For generations, her people had been prey for the monsters haunting the ruins of their world. Only when the Director had come and slain Akhar-Zegog had they dared think that their predators could be killed. That was why, when she had offered to teach them the magic of her people, every Nazzadi with the required mana had seized the offer with both hands, and thrown themselves into training whole-heartedly.

In Bovariastadt, they had come after the population had already suffered the effects of indoctrination, and had needed to break the chains binding their wills. In Moskva, there had been no one left to save, and all they had been able to do was put to rest the beasts created from their flesh and avenge them by striking the Dark Mother down.

Ever since Operation Gottesmörder, Zerayah had been haunted by the knowledge of how many people had died as a result of the Solstice Event. But here and now, they could still protect the people of Berun, and so she kept fighting, using every bit of mana she could squeeze out of her D-24.

Between the mental enhancement spell and the chaos of battle, time began to blur, one instant merging with the next into a single, eternal moment of struggle.

Then, as she cut a reptilian monstrosity in twain, she saw it, in the corner of her eye.

She saw the Moonlight Blade pierce through the Beast; heard it scream as it burned in silver fire. The howls of the Fiends shifted from rage to horror as their Master fell from the sky, pushed down by the Lady of Stars' impaling blade. The two combatants hit the ground like a meteor, and a wave of moonlight erupted from the point of impact, burning the Fiends to ash but leaving Zerayah and her companions untouched.

Amidst the all-encompassing radiance, the scream of the Beast abruptly cut off.

Silence fell, as Zerayah found herself no longer surrounded by foes. All at once, the exhaustion of battle caught up with her, and she nearly fainted as her enhancement spells dissipated, her mana reserves completely drained. Everything hurt : her limbs, her head, her magic (which she hadn't thought was possible, yet here it was). Never before had she pushed herself this far, not even in Moskva.

As she was about to collapse, a pair of white clawed hands caught her with unexpected gentleness. She looked up and met the five-eyed gaze of a pale giant staring down at her.

"Grantz ?" she managed to croak out.

The Werwolf nodded, the gesture utterly out of place coming from such a being.

"The Director," Zerayah murmured, darkness creeping in at the edges of her vision. "We have to … check …"

---

Visha's uniform was torn and ragged, exposing her skin to the air. Fortunately, there was no sunlight to burn her, thanks to the alien sky the Lady of Stars had brought with her. How exactly the Director had managed such a transformation, given she most definitely hadn't been carrying Kosmosblut with her into the Imperial Palace, the Untote had no idea, but that didn't matter right now.

Her hands were covered in frost, her fingers tipped by razor-sharp icicles hard enough to tear through the throat of a Fiend. But that wasn't needed anymore, because every last one of them had been annihilated by her Lady's latest spell.

She touched down near the crater where the Lady of Stars and her foe had landed, and saw her mistress rise, still in her transfigured form, her Moonlight Blade gently glowing in her celestial hand.

Visha waited for the Lady of Stars to disappear, replaced by the Director's human self. After all, that was what had happened every time she'd transformed before.

But seconds passed, and turned into minutes; and still, the star-specked form of the Lady of Stars remained, hovering above the ruins of the Imperial Palace, looking down at the city of

Berun with what Visha was fairly confident was a wistful expression on her night-sky-wrought face.

"Oh, Tanya," Visha whispered. "What have you done to yourself ?"

**"What I had to do,"** the Lady of Stars replied, and Visha jumped as she realized she had been listening. **"Or, rather, what I believed was right. Whether I was correct or not ... that remains to be decided."**

---

*September 3rd, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun*

As General Eric von Lergen approached the ruins of the Imperial Palace, it took every bit of his willpower not to empty his stomach – out of stress or sheer terror, not even he knew for certain.

It was a miracle there hadn't been any major rioting yet, mostly due to the fact that everyone was cowering in place and praying. Well, that, and the calming influence of Major Degurechaff whilst she was in her transformed form – nevermind the fact that such should be impossible after the battle of Moskva, based on every report he'd read from Doctor Iosefka.

In the wake of the disaster, High Command had taken charge, with Zettour and Rudersdorf sending orders to the vast security forces already mobilized for the conference. Reinforcements had been summoned from nearby garrisons, with orders to provide humanitarian help to those who needed it and enforce the peace. Lergen had made sure that the orders were very clear that anyone causing trouble wasn't legally responsible for their actions and should be treated as gently as possible so long as it didn't endanger others, drawing on some obscure protocol initially written in case of an enemy of the Reich using some kind of mind-altering substance to cause chaos.

Mages were flying in, helping putting out fires and dealing with car crashes and other accidents. In a way, it was heartening to see the aerial mages using their talents for something other than violence for once.

Nobody knew what was going on, and that wasn't an acceptable state of affairs. This was the capital of the Reich, and they had visitors from all over the world. It was another miracle that they hadn't all fled from the city yet.

So, *someone* needed to go see what was going on, and for his sins, that someone was Lergen. Intellectually, he understood why : he had more experience of directly interacting with Division Y and Mythos magic than anyone else in the Imperial Army, due to his participation in the Southern Continent, Remulan and Eastern campaigns.

But, emotionally, he had very much wanted to scream at Zettour when the old bastard had told him that they needed him to go to what had, until very recently, been the Imperial Palace, and figure out what the hell had happened that had made every mana detector in the region go crazy with readings every engineer swore weren't supposed to be possible.

He walked through the military blockade cordoning off the area without trouble, then went past the pockmarked Schlossbrücke and onto the islet where the Imperial Palace had stood this morning. A group of Division Y troopers stood guard on the other side, and to his mild surprise, he recognized the one leading them.

"Sergeant Barchet," he saluted.

"General Lergen," the veteran replied with a sharp salute. "It's been a while, hasn't it ?"

"That it has. I don't suppose you have any answers as to what happened here ?"

"Beats me, I'm afraid," the sergeant shrugged. "One moment, I was standing guard over the eggheads, the next, the Lieutenant started shouting something about the Major being in danger, and we were carried across the city by the fliers before being dropped here, with a bunch of monsters coming out of the Palace and the Lady fighting … something. So me and the lads didn't ask questions and opened fire."

"I see. And where is the Major at the moment ?"

"She came down inside and hasn't come out yet," Barchet replied, pointing a thumb at the ruins. "Miss Zerayah came out a while ago and told us to keep watch and send whoever came to investigate inside – guess that's you."

"Lucky me," Lergen whispered, though given Barchet's chuckle, not quietly enough.

Out of habit, he looked up at the heavens, only to be met with now-familiar constellations and a too-large full moon. Unlike the broken skies above Bovariastadt, this phenomenon only seemed to extend to the islet where the Imperial Palace had been built, which Lergen supposed was a (painfully small) silver lining to this whole catastrophe.

With a sigh, Lergen continued to walk, watching his footing as he marched. The inside of the Imperial Palace was as devastated as its outside, the rubble still warm with the heat of battle. Surprisingly, there was no trace of whatever it was Division Y had battled here, which Lergen assumed to be the result of such remains having been completely incinerated.

After a few moments of trying to navigate his way through the ruins, Lergen heard the sound of someone clear their throat and looked up sharply, one hand moving to his service weapon by reflex.

Lieutenant Grantz looked almost exactly like he had when Lergen had last met him in Russy. The only change to his appearance was his dress uniform, whose completely intact state clashed rather brutally with their devastated surroundings. And yet, Lergen knew immediately that there was something else different about the younger man.

"General," Grantz saluted.

"Lieutenant. Has something happened to you ? You seem … different."

The Werwolf smiled ruefully, and despite his familiarity with Division Y's supersoldiers (however unwitting it might be), Lergen had to check the impulse to take a step back at the

sudden show of (perfectly ordinary) teeth. Yes, there was definitely something going on with Grantz.

If pressed to put into words, Lergen would have described it as akin to what he'd felt the first time he had encountered the supersoldiers of Projekt W. It was as if the tolerance he'd built up to their threatening presence had been stripped away, leaving him just as nervous as he'd been in those distant, halcyon days when he had only needed to worry about the war pitching his homeland against the rest of Europa.

"Noticed it already, did you ? I guess I should have expected as much from you. Yes, something has changed. We still aren't sure what exactly, but it doesn't seem bad. I'll need to check in with the occultists back home once things have settled down."

Which wouldn't be anytime soon if Lergen was any judge.

"Anyway, please follow me, sir. The Lady sent me to guide you : we don't want you to get hurt walking around."

"After you, then, Lieutenant."

They walked through the maze of collapsed and burned-out wreckage, passing God alone knew how many ancient treasures of the Fatherland, now reduced to worthless slag, until they reached what Lergen was sure was the center of the ruin.

There, the Lady of Stars sat on a throne of debris transmuted into a strange black material dotted with inner stars eerily reminiscent of her own body, with Lieutenant Serebryakov standing at her side like a queen's lady-in-waiting. Nearby, Zerayah was laying down on what looked like a pile of torn curtains. If not for the slow rise and fall of her chest, Lergen would have feared for the Nazzadi girl's life.

"Major Degurechaff," he saluted her.

**"Colonel Lergen … no, it's General now, isn't ?"** she replied, cocking her head to the side as she inspected him, and he suppressed an internal quail at the weight of her inhuman gaze.

For a moment, it nearly dragged him back to the endless field of stars he'd witnessed when first meeting her eldritch gaze in Arene, but through a considerable effort of will, he managed to anchor himself in the here and now.

He swore she smiled then, as if he had passed a test of some sort.

**"It is good to see you. I expected you would be the one the General Staff would send."**

"What happened here ?" he asked, trying not to think about the implications of that. "And where is the Kaiser ?"

**"The Kaiser is dead,"** she said sombrely. **"He died years ago, and was replaced by a … a Mythos creature of great power, is probably the best way to explain it. It turned out that the Albish' story of the 'Not-Man' was more than their Royal Wizard's delusions."**

"Explain," he ordered, doing his best not to sound terrified at the fact he was apparently giving orders to a living god, or that the ramblings of that crazy old man who'd tried to kill him in Remula had anything true to them.

And she did. Lergen's headache grew with every word, and by the time she was done, he was torn between screaming due to his agonizing migraine, and because of the bone-chilling horror he felt at her tale.

Chapter End Notes

AN : I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Based on my notes, there are three more left to write, then the story will be over.

I hadn't planned for Grantz's transformation, but he managed to surprise me, which is always a pleasant surprise as an author. For those of you unfamiliar with CthulhuTech, the setting from which I ripped off the Werwölfe, what happened to him was that he underwent Metamorphosis, turning from a Phantom into a Wraith (you can find the official illustration on the SB thread). Usually, the process takes a lot more time, but I feel the circumstances justified something a bit more dramatic.

Normally, this is where I would ask for your thoughts and suggestions, but I'm afraid things are more or less locked in now. Hopefully you will enjoy the finale.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"Citizens of the Empire,*

*By now, all of you are aware of the events which rocked our fair capital yesterday. There has been much confusion and wild speculation, which is understandable, but ends today.*

*It is with a heavy heart that we must announce that, during the unthinkable attack on the Imperial Palace by a mage using Elder spellcraft of foul origins and fouler aspect, the entire Imperial Family was slain, including the Kaiser himself.*

*The investigation into how exactly such an atrocity was possible is still ongoing, but it has already been determined that it wasn't the work of foreign powers, but instead the result of internal treachery, with the Imperial Court having been infiltrated by the vile wretch responsible months ahead of the strike itself. Be assured that any trace of the conspiracy shall be rooted out and purged, with as much thoroughness as the chief murderer, who was killed by the Lady of Stars, Tanya von Degurechaff, mightiest of the Empire's supersoldiers.*

*For centuries, the Imperial Family led the Empire. Their exact role and prerogatives may have varied over the years, but their dedication to the greater glory of the Fatherland remained unchanged. In recognition of their long and distinguished service, until the end of the month, a period of public mourning shall be observed across the Reich.*

*Further announcements will be made as the situation develop. In the meantime, please remain calm and follow any instructions from the police and military personnel. In addition, please report any unnatural phenomenon to the military at once, but DO NOT ATTEMPT TO DEAL WITH THEM YOURSELVES, as doing so might be dangerous in the extreme, both for you and the people around you. If in doubt, evacuate to a safe distance and contact the closest aforementioned personnel, who have all been distributed contact information to the proper authorities.*

*Though this is a dark hour for the Empire, let there be no doubt that we shall prevail over this latest challenge as well.*

*May God be with us all."*

Public announcement in Berun, September 4th, 1926.

---

*BERUN UNDER ATTACK !*

*Yesterday, the capital of the Empire, Berun, was the site of a violent magical attack targeting the Imperial Palace, where the Reich's ruling family has resided for several centuries.*

*The images above, sent to us by our correspondent in Berun, speak for themselves of the devastation which was wrought during the short (a mere few minutes according to eyewitnesses) but intense battle. The Palace was reduced to rubble, but mercifully the fighting was contained to its immediate surroundings.*

*Nevertheless, the entirety of the Imperial Court was lost in the attack, including the whole of the Imperial Family, which had been gathered in order to pay homage to the Director of the infamous Division Y, that branch of the Imperial Army responsible for the creation and deployment of the Wunderwaffen which shall go down in History as the defining factor of the Great War.*

*The nature of the attack remains the subject of much speculation. Nearly the entire population of Berun witnessed an aerial battle between two creatures of immense power, one which was recognized as the Lady of Stars, Division Y's supersoldier who first appeared at Arene and was later sighted at Bovariastadt and Moskva. Her opponent, on the other hand, was an unknown quantity, albeit one whose mere sight, even from kilometers away, inspired a deep sense of dread and repulsion in every onlooker.*

*Unfortunately, there were no pictures taken of the fight itself that our correspondent was able to obtain.*

*At time of writing, the Empire has yet to make a formal announcement regarding the attack, apart from general calls to remain calm and cooperate with the armed forces which were called in from the garrisons outside the capital to help maintain order.*

*Though our President was in Berun at the time for the upcoming conference regarding the regulation of Elder Magecraft, along with numerous experts and other assorted personnel, we have been assured that none of them were in any danger during this sudden and terrible crisis. The threat was confined to small lake-born islet on which the Imperial Palace once stood.*

*Despite this tragic event, the President has announced his intent to remain in Berun for the conference, which is still slated to go on. In a press release, he declared that, since the Imperial Army was able to contain this attack so quickly, there is no danger to him remaining in Berun, while the mere fact that such an attack happened at all reinforces the need for such a conference in the first place.*

*At home, there have been many voices rising in protest of such a cavalier attitude from the Commander-in-Chief ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the Unified States newspaper *The National Truth*, September 5th, 1926.

---

*"Though I was as surprised by it as everyone else, it turns out that the paperwork for Major Degurechaff's ennoblement actually went through before the Tragedy. Her official name, as far as the Reich's bureaucracy is concerned, is now Tanya von Degurechaff – I dread to imagine how much paperwork will need to be updated now, considering the influence she wielded prior to this.*

*However interesting this might be on its own, my investigation uncovered something of much greater import. It turns out that the same Imperial decree which ennobled Degurechaff also made her adopted by the Kaiser, with all the seals and signatures required to maker her an honorary member of the Imperial Family.*

*Given what she told General Lergen of what happened in the Palace in the last months, and what the wretched creature responsible intended for the future, one shudders to imagine the true motivations behind this adoption. But I think we can turn this to our advantage, even if it means making use of the schemes of the very creature responsible for the Tragedy. With the destruction of the Palace and the death of the entire extended Imperial Family, the Major is – strictly technically speaking – the next in line for the Imperial Throne.*

*I'm sure that, if we were to look up the family tree long enough, we could find some distant relative to put on the throne. But, since Degurechaff was adopted into the Imperial House itself, however briefly and in a … disputable manner, there is a case to make her, if not Empress, then perhaps something else.*

*Order must be maintained, now more than ever. And, based on what I have heard from the Americans and our visitors from the Far East, the Mythos threat is far from dealt with. In such a situation, the Reich cannot afford to even risk a fool or a coward obtaining the throne. However symbolic the position of Kaiser may have become in recent years, the authority it wields remains vast, and with the star of the Empire in the ascendant as the Great War staggers to a close, the associated power is vaster still.*

*I don't expect the Major to thank me for proposing this, but I genuinely believe it has to be done, and I will do everything in my power to support her – as I know her subordinates will.*

*… That Serebryakov girl worries me, and not just because she is a blood-drinking undead. Loyalty is to be commended, of course, but in her case, it seems to border on obsession."*

From the personal writings of Brigadier General Hans von Zettour, September 7th, 1926.

---

*September 10th, 1926 – Imperial City Berun – Charlotte's Palace*

The leaders of the world's most powerful nations met in a somber and worried mood, which clashed with the luxury of their surroundings. Charlotte's Palace, the chosen location for the conference, was a marvel of baroque architecture, built a couple of centuries back by the wife of the Kaiser of the time, if the President of the Unified States remembered the briefing he'd read correctly.

The room in which they were gathered had once been a ballroom, but now the dance floor was covered by a large round table at which the assembled worthies sat. In the moment before the conference's appointed starting hour, the President looked at them all in turn.

There was the new Prime Minister of the Allied Kingdom, who looked like he'd much rather be just about anywhere else. Nobody could fault the Empire's hospitality to Churbull's successor, but the President wouldn't have wanted to be in his place anyway. It wasn't even his fault, although given what he knew of Albish politics, the American suspected most of the

stuff Albion was paying the price for now would still have happened had he been in charge instead of Churbull.

The Francois President, who had formally signed the Republic's surrender and led De Lugo's denunciation, was paradoxically in a better position than the Albish Prime Minister. Sure, his country didn't have any Mythos soldiers and weapons left, and its military bases were still occupied by Imperial forces, but all the blame for the Eikons' deeds had been shifted on the renegade Vice Minister.

To the surprise of everyone, Commander Zhenkov had arrived the previous day, riding into Berun right as the city's skies were shaken by the battle between titans. A wise man would have ordered his driver to turn back, but Zhenkov had instead stopped to the side of the road, watched the entire confrontation go down, and then called on the radio to ask what the hell was going on, before shrugging when nobody had picked up and finishing his trip to find out in person. Presumably, after what he'd seen in the campaign against the Dark Mother, such sights no longer bothered him.

Sat next to the Russy officer, Miss Adashino was a pretty thing in a white robe with golden threads, who hid her mouth behind a fan decorated with some exquisite artwork and calligraphy whose meaning eluded the American President completely. He forced himself to remember that, however frail she might appear, she had flown from the Akitsushiman Dominion to Berun under her own power.

Various interprets sat on simpler chairs behind the representatives who needed them. Deciding which language would be used for the conference had been a diplomatic battle by itself. In the end, they had decided on Imperial. Strictly speaking, Albish might have been more convenient, but, well. Nobody had forgotten the Allied Kingdom's various blunders in recent years, and even the Unified States' assistance to the Reich in Russy wasn't enough to balance things out.

"Introducing Her Highness, the Regentrix of the Reich," began the herald, a bead of sweat running down his forehead the only sign of the nervousness he was feeling, "Tanya von Degurechaff !"

The figure that strode through the gates was tall, over three meters in height, and as magnificent as she was terrible. She shouldn't have been able to pass through the gates without bending over, yet somehow, she did, space bending to allow her passage in a casual display of power that wasn't missed by anyone at the table.

The President had seen images of the 'Lady of Stars' before, procured by the Unified States' operatives. He'd even managed to catch a glimpse of her in action when that unpleasantness had occurred at the Imperial Palace, though that had been from very far away, before his bodyguards could jam him into an underground bunker to wait out the madness.

But she was much more impressive in person. She was like a cut of night-sky wrapped into the form of a tall woman, shining with the light of thousands of stars. Her right hand rested on the pommel of a blade of moonlight that hung in the air around her waist, and her eyes blazed with the same inner illumination as her gaze swept over the room. Despite himself, the

President felt the impulse to get up and fall to his knees, but he fought it down, as did everyone else at the table.

Then, she shrunk, and the starry radiance faded, until what stood before them was a tall young woman, with pale skin and blonde hair, wearing a mix between a military uniform and an aristocratic dress. The only visible sign that she was more than an ethereal beauty, apart from the computation orb topping the cane she held instead of her sword, were her eyes, which were still shining with the light of distant galaxies.

Well, reflected the President, that explained the normal-sized chair between Lergen and Zettour that had been left empty once everyone else was seated. It would have been awkward to have a giant standing up while everyone else was sitting down.

He bit down a burst of nervous laughter at the mental image and focused on the present situation with the ease of a career politician. The news that the mysterious Director of Division Y was to succeed the defunct Kaiser as head of state had been announced the previous day, to as much fanfare as could be mustered under the circumstances.

Popular reactions had been muted, for lack of a better word. The Berunites were still reeling from the shock of the Imperial Palace's destruction and the sight of two awesome beings, one as horrible as the other was magnificent, battling over the ruins. Right after the news that the Great War was finally over and that their nation was being honored by being the host of a conference poised to redefined global politics, the shock had been even worse.

The fact Generals Zettour, Rudersdorf and Lergen had all declared their support of the move had been the decisive factor, in the President's opinion (and those of his advisors who had accompanied him on the trip). With the nobility reeling from the deaths of so many of its most influential members, and the fact nobody in Berun was willing to go against the Lady of Stars for obvious reasons, the decree had been ratified by the Imperial Parliament within a couple of days of the initial announcement (and most of that time had been spent tracking down every member of the legislature and returning them to work).

In essence, the Empire was now ruled by a military cabal presided over by a living goddess, who had her own army of monsters utterly loyal to her, and at the very least, the admiration and respect of the rest of the Imperial Army, which had proven its ability to taken on the rest of Europa on its own.

Well, if nothing else, the President mused ruefully, the conference wasn't going to be boring.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Tanya von Degurechaff declared as she took her seat, "I welcome you all to Berun. Now, let us begin. There is much we must discuss, for the good of our respective countries and, indeed, the entire world."

---

*Unified States President (USP) : "So, are we finally going to get some answers about what the hell happened in the Imperial Palace ? And by answers, I mean something a tad more elaborate than the reassuring sop you served the population."*

*Tanya von Degurechaff (TVD) : "Of course. A shape-shifter of considerable power infiltrated the Palace an undetermined amount of time ago, murdered the Kaiser, and enslaved the entire Court before transforming them into monsters akin to those which appeared in Kemet when the Nameless City was breached by the Albish expedition. It arranged for me to go there in order to suborn me. However, I broke free of its control, much like I broke the influence of the Eikons at Bovariastadt. Unfortunately, it was too late to rescue the members of the court, as they had already been warped beyond my ability to reverse."*

*USP : "You say that the … creature we saw you fight was a shape-shifter. And you clearly changed forms just now. So, I am going to ask the obvious question : how do we know you are Director Degurechaff ?"*

*TVD : "An excellent question, Mister President. Division Y has numerous protocols to check against such infiltration. After the battle was over, Lieutenant Serebryakov ran through them and confirmed my identity, along with Lieutenant Grantz and Sergeant Barchet, followed by Doctor Laurence later on."*

*USP : "All of whom are members of Division Y, I can't help but notice."*

*General Lergen (GL) : "And trusted members of the Imperial Army, whose very loyalty to their Director would demand of them to make absolutely certain she wasn't replaced by a pretender."*

*Francois President (FP) : "If General Lergen is certain, then I think we can put the matter aside."*

*USP : "Alright, alright. I just wanted to be sure."*

*General Zhenkov (GZ) : "Which is understandable. I know I would've asked if you hadn't. But now that's out of the way, let's get to business, shall we ?"*

*[…]*

*TVD : "Though we believe the threat to Europa has been handled for the time being, there remains other beings akin to the Pretender, that which the Albish called the Not-Man in their translation of ancient texts, across the world. I believe that is the reason for our friends from the Far East's presence here, correct ?"*

*Sakura Adashino (SA) : "You are correct, Degurechaff-san. As we speak, my father and his colleagues are struggling to keep the ancient evil which broke free of its shackles during the Solstice Event from reaching our Emperor."*

*TVD : "And there is also a threat in Brazil ?"*

*USP : "Correct again. People are disappearing or committing atrocities across the country, centered on a region nobody comes out of. Interrogation of the culprits, when they can be taken alive, has revealed that they seem to be under the same kind of mental effect as the Ildoan Army was prior to the battle of Bovariastadt, though with some differences in how their fanatical dedication to their unseen master expresses itself."*

*SA : "That does sound similar to the effects of our enemy on the unfortunate civilians who crossed her path."*

*TVD : "The Fox and the Hierophant – that is what the Pretender called them during our discussion before coming to blows. Two of its servants, who returned after the Solstice Event. In the Fox's case, the mana disruption broke her free of her imprisonment, while the Hierophant was awakened from his slumber – or broke free of his own chains, that much wasn't clear."*

*USP : "It doesn't really matter, does it ? The situation in Brazil isn't looking good. The Brazilian Emperor is very worried and asking for our assistance."*

*TVD : "As fellow members of the human race, it is the solemn duty of the Reich to come to the assistance of our brethren against the Mythos' dark forces. We will assist the Dominion and the Brazilian Empire against these threats, of that you can be certain – but that much isn't enough to safeguard the future."*

*FP : "What do you mean by that, exactly ?"*

*TVD : "Bitter truth though it may be, the Pretender didn't orchestrate the Great War. That was the work of mortal men alone; it merely sought to take advantage of it to further its unspeakable ends. And the Mythos will continue to try to use our conflicts against us to enter our world. If basic morality won't suffice, then let that be a good enough reason for all of us to pursue peace between nations."*

*[...]*

*TVD : "The documents that have been passed to each of you are a brief summary of Division Y's budget since its founding."*

*Albish Prime Minister (APM) : "These figures can't possibly be accurate ! Are you saying that the Division was only really active for the last few years ?!"*

*TVD : "Exactly. And, as you can see, while the sums involved are considerable from the perspective of an ordinary citizen, they are mere small change for a country."*

*USP : "I won't divulge the exact numbers, but you can all rest assured that our own superweapon programs have cost us a hell of a lot more."*

*TVD : "That's because your country's approach is unique, thanks to Mister Teslus – and, as you've no doubt realized, a lot quicker and safer, unless I miss my guess. But when it comes to a more spell-oriented approach, the cost of research is disproportionally low compared to the potential results. We might never know for sure, but I am reasonably certain the Russy team whose activities led to the Solstice Event were working with similar budgetary constraints, although they no doubt had a much less restrictive approach to human test subjects."*

*GZ : "You can be damn sure of it, yes. Bastards never cared for the people, no matter what they claimed. If they did, they wouldn't have fed that stuff to everyone the moment they could instead of doing more tests."*

*TVD : "The main issue I am trying to get to is that, while we may have had a head-start, any country could try to follow in our footsteps, even the smaller ones. If they are lucky, they will fail to accomplish anything but waste time and effort, accomplishing little beyond making some archaeological discoveries which some academics might consider of interests. If they are unlucky, they will cause another Solstice Event."*

*APM : "Then we have to prevent that from happening at all costs ! Make researching the Mythos forbidden, hunt anyone trying to break the interdict –"*

*TVD : "Yes, we must. But merely declaring something is illegal won't stop people from doing it if they believe it is in their best interests. We can and should make such research punishable, but that won't be enough. We must also do everything we can to keep nations from feeling they should research it in the first place. The reason the Empire developed the Wunderwaffen in the first place was the same reason our military has been so large and powerful compared to our neighbours : because, right or wrong, we believed it was necessary for our safety."*

*FP : "I see your point. And it doesn't even have to be a result of genuine concern for one's safety : any would-be tyrant with enough resources might decide the Mythos is a shortcut to power, with catastrophic results. But how do you propose we bring other countries into the fold ? By force ?"*

*TVD : "No. We might be able to win, if we worked together, but that would only push the other countries to desperation, which the Mythos would take advantage of. No, the key to our success lies with the T-Engine. Mister Teslus' invention holds the potential to reshape human civilization in a manner far more comprehensive than anything Division Y ever created. At the same time, the technology is dangerous and complex enough that it can be considered Mythos-grade."*

*USP : "The T-Engine is the intellectual property of the Unified States. And we won't part with it lightly."*

*TVD : "Nor would I expect you to, but I believe sharing the technology in a controlled manner is in all of our best interests. From what Mister Teslus told me, learning to build a T-Engine is a very difficult process. The Unified States would be the center of such learning, the place where the greatest minds of the entire world would go in order to study its secrets."*

*USP : "When you put it like that, it does sound tempting. But it wouldn't be without its own problems. For instance, much of Magna Rumeli's wealth is based on its oil exports. General use of the T-Engine would cripple them."*

*TVD : "Too bad for them. They, and the rest of the oil barons of the world, will have to adapt or perish. I have seen what reckless use of fossil fuels will do to this world. Scientists have already uncovered the effects of releasing so much carbon into the atmosphere as well, and I don't intend to keep the world from being destroyed by the Dark Mother and her ilk only for climate change to bring Human civilization low instead in a century or so."*

*SA : "Especially since you will still be there to see it, I presume ?"*

*TVD : "That is not certain yet … but yes, it is most likely."*

*[…]*

*GZ : "What you are proposing is essentially the foundation of a new world order, unlike anything that has ever existed before. A union of the most powerful nations in the world, bound by a common purpose and set of rules – not just to agree to follow regulations like what the Treaty of Worms sought, but to direct the course of History itself."*

*TVD : "I do. With the threat of Mythos propagation, it is the only sensible course. Humanity must stand united against the dangers from the Beyond. In addition, as I said before, warfare between nations is a breeding ground for the kind of despair and horror that makes one consider using the Mythos in the first place. We must put an end to it, or sooner or later, Mankind's reign over this world will come to a terrible end."*

*USP : "The way you describe it, it all sounds so very nice. Do you really believe we can build a utopia ?"*

*TVD : "No. I am not so naive as that. Human nature cannot be changed that easily : to completely eradicate conflict is beyond any of us. But it is still a goal worth striving toward."*

*APM : "Even you ? We have all heard rumors about what happened in Arene and Bovariastadt after your passing. This, 'Path of Stars' which appeared in your wake has spread all the way to Albion."*

*TVD : "I have no direct influence on the Path of Stars. From what we've been able to establish, its members aren't mentally affected like the victims of the Eikons' indoctrination."*

*APM : "Really ? They started painting images of you and casting aside their loyalty to their homelands all on their own ?"*

*TVD : "Of course not. They were traumatized, and are reacting to that trauma by acting to prevent the circumstances which led to it from repeating themselves. The people of Arene saw their city used as a battleground by those they believed were their protectors, and the people of Bovariastadt … well, we all know what they suffered."*

*FP : "Nevertheless, much as it pains me to say so, our Albish colleague has a point. Nobody here is accusing you of deliberately warping the minds of the civilians, but it is undeniable that your transformed appearance left a mark on the psyche of those who saw it."*

*TVD : "The very idea of bending people's mind repulses me. If you want to investigate to confirm Division Y's findings, by all means, so long as you respect the human rights of those concerned."*

*GL : "But that is outside the topic of today's discussion, I think."*

*[…]*

*TVD : "Colonialism must end, and the occupied territories must be returned to their native people – a process which will need to be undertaken with great care, or we will only plant the*

*seeds of tribal conflict which will plague the concerned areas for generations – and with the possibility of any side delving into the Mythos, that is a risk we cannot afford."*

*APM : "You're asking us to abandon our entire colonial empire ?! That's absurd ! The Allied Kingdom won't stand for it !"*

*TVD : "You will. Because if you do not give them independence, then they shall have it anyway. It is the inevitable course of History, and would be even if you hadn't lost the Great War. And when they do cast off the chains of colonialism, I will fly to Londinium and empty the Albish Museum of every single artefact that wasn't legally acquired, before returning them to their countries of origin. Given that this would probably take me a decade or two, I would rather not have to do that, but I will if I must."*

*APM : "I – that is ..."*

*TVD : "Unacceptable ? No. It is how it will be. The time of Albion dictating global policy, be it by intimidation or manipulation, is over, Prime Minister."*

*FP : "There's going to be a lot of grumbling about that in the Republic. The Empire has been very generous with the terms of surrender after Arene and the Battle of the Rhine, but ownership of the colonies is a point of pride for us."*

*TVD : "Will it still be so, when the colonials rise up in revolt against their oppressors, with guns if we are lucky, and eldritch nightmares at their side if we are not ? And they will revolt, make no mistake. You can pretend to your own population that this is about bringing civilization to savage lands as much as you like, but we all know the truth, and so do they. The very human spirit which saw us victorious over the Congregation of Michael, the Dark Mother and the Pretender means that such dominion by distant foreign powers cannot last forever."*

*[...]*

*USP : "You speak of the future as if you know what it holds. Is that actually the case ?"*

*TVD : "Not exactly. Being K was an achronal entity, capable of orchestrating its own manifestation by reaching backward in time to turn the mere possibility of its manifestation a certainty. I am not so unfettered from causality, but I can perceive potential futures for the world, and I see problems looming which we can take care of now with relatively little effort."*

*USP : "Well, that's ... interesting, for sure. So, in your opinion as a seer, what do you think will happen if no union of nations is created as a result of this conference ?"*

*TVD : "War. Perhaps not soon, if we are lucky, but eventually. And of a scale that will make the horrors of the Great War pale into insignificance, as creatures such as the Dark Mother are brought into the world in greater numbers as countries escalate, until Mankind is wiped off the face of this world."*

Excerpts from the minutes of the first day of the Berun Conference, September 10th, 1926.

*"The undersigned plenipotentiaries, in the name of their respective governments, agree to the respective terms and principles in regard to the use of Mythos magecraft and other Elder magicks, per the definitions agreed upon in the Protocols' Annexes :*

*The summoning, entreaty, and otherwise interaction with a Mythos entity of Class Seven and above is strictly prohibited, as the risks should the containment measures fail in such a case are too great to contemplate.*

*The creation of enhanced troops from human subjects shall be limited to volunteers, made fully aware of the risks and expected effects of any involved procedures. In addition, joining the military of any government involved with the process shall not be considered equivalent to volunteering, and no punishment, blame or pressure shall be applied upon soldiers or civilians to coerce them to give their formal agreement. Furthermore, all enhanced soldiers shall be given full human rights, expanded to include the duty of their respective government to ensure their well-being and the satisfaction of any unusual need arising from their new condition (such as particular dietary requirements).*

*The use of Mythos spellcraft or weaponry where there is a clear risk to civilians is prohibited, save in the circumstances where such assets are required to protect the lives and well-being of said civilians; in such a case, the civilians in question shall be evacuated with all priority, and later examined for sign of mental and physical contamination.*

*In case of the manifestation of a Class Seven or above Mythos entity, all forces affiliated with the signatories must stop any ongoing hostilities at once and collaborate to dispatch the entity, regardless of the cause of its manifestation.*

*Any form of Mythos magecraft aimed at influencing the minds of human beings, be it temporarily or permanently, is strictly forbidden.*

*Inhuman entities displaying human-level intellect shall be granted the same rights and privileges as ordinary human beings, so long as they show no sign of inherent hostility to Mankind. Any reasonable efforts shall be made to assist them in integrating with human society, and, if not possible, to let them exist peacefully. Weaponization of such entities shall be treated with the same care as enhanced human soldiery.*

*All government agencies must remain strictly secular, as the rites of organised religion can be warped by Mythos entities for their own benefits. While individual members of such agencies are entitled to their own personal beliefs, any attempt to enforce these beliefs upon the rest of the agency shall be cause for immediate termination if malign intent is discovered upon investigation.*

*The study of Elder relics shall be regulated, with sites contained by a joint task force of their host nation and the League of Nations. Any information, knowledge, research material, and other elements linked to the Mythos shall be kept from the general population, in order to avoid the birth of cults among civilians. All access to the Mythos within the signatories' borders shall be monitored to ensure there is no mental contamination, following the security protocols developed by Division Y. Any other form of Mythos study shall be criminalized and prosecuted with the most extreme vehemence.*

*Individuals researching the Mythos shall be evaluated for mental and moral resilience, following a set of exams provided by Division Y. Those who fail these tests shall be given another opportunity to attempt them after six months, and those who pass them shall undergo a different battery of tests after a year, to ensure that the study of the Mythos hasn't eroded their faculties.*

*Spatial distortion effects shall not be used within the territories of foreign nations without express permission from the lawful authorities therein, and such permissions shall be subject to revocation at any time for any reason.*

*Elder artefacts judged too dangerous to be studied shall be remanded into the care of Division Y and consigned to the Black Vaults. For practical reasons and to avoid concentrating too many dangerous items, a Black Vault location shall be built in the sovereign territory of each signatory nation following the specifications procured by Division Y and under the supervision of their experts.*

*[...]*

*To enforce adherence to the Protocols, a special task force under the League of Nations' authority shall be assembled, composed of operatives lent by the signatories and under the authorities of Her Highness Regentrix Tanya von Degurechaff or her duly appointed successor. This task force shall monitor the research, development and use of Mythos magecraft and technology by the signatories."*

Extract from the first draft of the Berun Protocols, one of the core texts of the League of Nations' charter, September 12th, 1926.

---

*"I don't really buy the Imps' story. It sounds too clean, too convenient. Far more likely, what happened to the Kaiser was that something went horribly wrong with one of Division Y's Wunderwaffen. Or, given the degree of competence they have shown so far, someone at the Imperial Court got their hands on something they shouldn't and thought they could use it to their advantage, and they don't want word to get out and tarnish the image of the Empire.*

*In the end, though, it doesn't really matter. After everything that has happened, nobody dares to call them out, and we need their help to deal with this insanity in any case. Let Division Y overthrow the Kaiser and put their most powerful supersoldier as the head of state if they want to. Honestly, given the Reich's policies in the last few years, I don't expect that will change much anyway.*

*What's most important is to prevent another Solstice Event from happening just a few hundred kilometers of our own southern border. If Degurechaff wants to be Empress in all but name, let her have it – it's not like we can stop her, anyway.*

*Still, weird as she is, I don't think Degurechaff was the one who planned this, if it was indeed planned. It's pretty obvious Zettour was the one to set the whole thing up, but I have a feeling it wasn't his idea, either. He is a political animal to be sure, but he's spent his entire decades-long career playing by the rules of the Empire, and this isn't so much playing by the rules as setting the rulebook on fire.*

*No, my money is on Lergen. He was the one who went into the ruins once the noise stopped, and even though the Albish' screaming about him has proven to be a bunch of bullcrap, it's clear to anyone with eyes that the man has ambitions. I don't think he orchestrated the destruction of the Imperial Palace, exactly, but he sure as hell took advantage of the opportunity it presented. I mean, everyone knows he was the one officer the Empire trusted to give Degurechaff orders and command Division Y despite not being a part of it."*

From the private correspondence of the President of the Unified States, September 13th, 1926.

---

*September 18th, 1926 – Imperial Capital Berun*

I laid down in bed, in my now adult human form, gently stroking Kory's hair as she slept pressed against me, having finally exhausted herself after a long hour of clinging to me and repeatedly being assured that yes, I was fine.

The girl had come all the way from Castle Schwartzstein to be with me. Well, more specifically, she had been escorted here by Division Y personnel : it wasn't like she had come here all on her own, and I would have had some very firm words with Elya if she had.

Shifting between shapes was becoming easier every day. My body was more a projection of my ascended self, and altering it was as simple as moving which aspects of it existed in three-dimensional space. A little experimentation had revealed that I was still locked in the 'Tanya' shape : I couldn't transform back into my male, adult, Japanese form, which had probably something to do with the metaphysics of how my ascension was rooted into the body I had been born in on this world.

Still, even if I was still female, it had taken a while for Kory to calm down after seeing me as an adult, which I supposed I should have seen coming. In my previous world, it had been a well-documented fact that children could react badly to their parental figures changing appearances : even something as simple as a father shaving his beard could cause panic, or so I had heard.

I'd probably have to go through this again when I returned to Castle Schwartzstein and met the other children there, I reflected. Of course, it would be some time before I could go to the place that somehow, without me realizing when it had happened, I'd come to think of as home.

I wasn't convinced me becoming the Regentrix was a good idea, but Zettour had insisted, and he was more in tune with Imperial politics than I. If giving me a fancy new title could help prevent panic and give my voice more weight at the conference, then I was willing to bear with it. With any luck, I would be able to gently push for the Empire to complete the shift toward democracy that most advanced nations had undergone in the Twentieth Century I remembered.

I certainly wasn't looking forward to my new responsibilities. I wasn't so naive as to believe I could somehow lead Humanity into a perfect, golden age. But I would be a poor time-traveller indeed if, having ended up in a position of global influence despite my best efforts to

live a quiet life, I didn't at least try to prevent some of the problems which had plagued the Twenty-First Century of my previous world. No doubt new issues would pop up even should I succeed – Mankind was a fractious species, after all.

In the meantime, I would need to be very careful to avoid being turned into a figure of worship. The Path of Stars was already making too much progress in the population for my tastes, and with the section of the Accords prohibiting government bodies from being overtly religious and me being in charge of enforcing them, that could quickly become awkward to say the least.

So far, the conference had gone much better than I had feared. I supposed witnessing the destruction of the Imperial Palace and learning how close the Empire – the single most knowledgeable nation in the world when it came to the Mythos – had come to being enslaved by an eldritch entity had motivated everyone to take things seriously. That, and the fact that there were still lingering Mythos threats nobody wanted to let rise to Being K's level.

Soon, the adoption of the Berun Protocols would be publicly announced, along with the founding of the League of Nations and my assignment as its primary enforcer. Oh, they would give me a more dignified title, but it was clear that my primary purpose would be to be the League's biggest stick, save for the contents of the Black Vaults – a list of which we'd share with the signatories nations, both as proof of our commitment to the Protocols and as a not-so-subtle reminder that the Reich was still the most advanced nation when it came to weaponizing the Mythos.

My first deployment would be to either Akitsushima or Brazil. With the Americans willing to help their southern neighbour, and the Fox getting closer and closer to the Akitsushiman Emperor with every week, the Far East would take priority, although we were still going to send Division Y forces to Brazil to help investigate and contain the Hierophant.

Technically, since Weiss had been able to kill the Heresiarch in Kemet, my presence might not be strictly necessary to handle the other active Ancients. But it was better to be safe than sorry, and a clear demonstration of the League's Mythos power would go a long way to ensuring its longevity. I was all too aware of how short-lived and ineffective the League of Nations had ended up being in my old world, and had no interest in seeing its failure repeated here.

Then there was the Grandmother, eldest of all the remaining servants of the Not-Man's previous iterations. While I could, by stretching my new perceptions to their absolute limits, detect the echoes of the Fox's and the Hierophant's actions, I sensed no trace of her whatsoever. Partly, this might be due to the manifestation of Being K still messing things up in Russy, but I suspected that was more because of how much older she was, and how she had gone to ground after the battle of Moskva, while the other two were still active.

I could already tell that the Grandmother was going to be a much longer-lived problem. She had helped create the Okhotniki, saving many Russy soldiers from a fate worse than death. With the reveal of her involvement in the Not-Man's trap, however, the loyalty of these hunters became suspect. Did the procedure the Grandmother had taught to the Federation Army's medics hide some kind of backdoor she could use to control them ? Or were the runes carved into their flesh like the seal she had placed upon my own transformation, something

which would inevitably erode in time, causing them to become Progeny at the worst possible moment ?

We didn't know. Zhenkov hadn't been pleased by the news, that much was obvious, and had asked for the Division's expertise in studying the Okhotniki to find out. If there was anything we could do to prevent them from being used against their own people, we would do it : as fellow comrades in the battle against the Dark Mother, it was the least they deserved.

And if our suspicions were correct, and there was nothing we could do about it, well. We would deliver them the only mercy we could. There was no doubt in my mind that tracking down and neutralizing the Grandmother would be the work of years, if not more.

I hoped that these three were the only Ancients left, the only remaining immortal servants of the Not-Man's predecessors who had survived the purges of Being X's minions. Given the vast distances between the Fox's and the Hierophant's locations, that seemed plausible : surely any other Ancients would also have been awakened by the Solstice Event.

Of course, there was the possibility that they had, but had been ordered to remain hidden – or that the Not-Man had simply failed to find them in time to give them orders and were keeping a low profile to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Only the smartest and most dangerous of the servants of the Not-Man's previous instances would have managed to survive, after all.

But all of that could wait until tomorrow. I had worked without pause since my transformation, but this was starting to take a toll on me. The sensation of fatigue was so different from what I was used to that it had taken me a while to recognize it as such, but eventually it had become clear that, even in my new state, I still needed to sleep.

I closed my eyes, relaxed, and let Morpheus take me. Despite my worries, slept came quickly, and the chamber disappeared.

The next thing I saw was a familiar bearded old man clad in elaborate robes, with a golden halo radiating from behind his head.

"I have come to parley !" Being X shouted, raising his hands in surrender.

Chapter End Notes

AN : My plans to finish this story by the end of this year are in the air at the moment, since I am very busy with IRL stuff. At the very least, I should be able to finish it in January of next year.

Yes, I played fast and loose with Imperial succession laws, whatever those are in a world where magic is real (remember, the world of YS is Not!Earth, not Earth). I think that the circumstances justify it, however, especially since the Empire is canonically a military dictatorship run by Zettour and Rudersdorf by that point in the timeline, WITHOUT

Division Y and the Mythos (with the only qualifier that their authority isn't absolute, since they can't just surrender due to public opinion). Putting Tanya as the head of state in order to avoid the Reich being thrown into chaos feels like the kind of move Hans "the Fox" von Zettour would pull in a heartbeat.

Sure, some people might object and complain about "principle of the law" and "complete and utter violation of the tenets of monarchy", but that's what you have the Untoten and Werwölfe for. (I am, of course, joking. Tanya would never use supersoldiers for such mundane and illegal purpose. But for some reason, when Zettour assures any potential opposition of that, they don't believe him. Curious, that.)

Next up, I finally get to explain the cosmology I came up with many, many chapters ago. Hopefully my notes still make sense to me and don't read too much like the ramblings of a mad man. Which, yes, would be appropriate, but when it's a tad disturbing when the ramblings were written by your own hand.

Also, if you have a suggestion for the name of the agency operating under the League of Nations to enforce the Berun Protocols, please share it with me, as I have been drawing a blank on the matter for the past few days.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*September 15th, 1926 – Tanya von Degurechaff's dreamscape*

Before I could register Being X's words, my fist found his face, sending him reeling backward with a satisfying crunching sound.

In the few seconds it took him to recover, I took a look at my surroundings. At first glance, we were in the same infinite white space where I had met Being X the first time. But now, my perceptions were much greater than those of the freshly-deceased human soul I had been during my last visit, and I saw what was hidden behind the whiteness – not so much in deceit, I suspected, as because any mortal spirit witnessing such a sight would have been driven mad on the spot.

I saw …

I saw the gears of Creation, endlessly turning. I saw the wheels of the Universe, moved by the limitless flows of cosmic energies that linked all things to one another. I saw a machinery of impossible complexity stretching across the entire tapestry of Reality, ordering the motion of galaxies, the orbits of electrons, the electric impulses in the brains of every creature that had ever lived, and stranger things which no human language had the words for yet.

I realized that, even now, after everything I had gone through, I was still only a minor note in the symphony of existence. For some reason, I found that reassuring.

With some effort, I tore my gaze away from this infinite engine, and refocused on the bearded man in front of me, who was still looking down at my fist nervously. Then, finally, my mind finished processing what he had just said, and I cautiously lowered my hand.

"Parley ?" I repeated, still not quite believing I had heard him right. "What do you mean, 'parley' ?"

"Precisely that," he gulped, gingerly touching his broken nose. There was a brief flash of golden light, and the injury vanished, if it had ever existed beyond the cosmetic level.

I wasn't sure whether I had actually hurt him, or if he'd just let me think I had – though for what reason, I could only guess at. I didn't let my guard down, but I also didn't punch him again, no matter how tempting a proposition that was.

"It is long past due we have another conversation. Or perhaps," he winced, "I should say our first proper conversation, given how our last encounter went."

"Why now ?" I challenged him.

"Because this is the first time in years that I can communicate with you directly."

"Good to know the wards of Castle Schwartzstein did their work," I said drily.

"Of course they did," he said, sounding almost offended. "The entity you call the Not-Man made damn sure they would, otherwise I would have interfered in your work long before you summoned a bunch of terraforming sub-engines to annihilate tens of thousands of people."

It was my turn to wince. What had happened to the Dacian Army hadn't been intended in the slightest. Back then, we had no idea just how dangerous the Flute of the Dark Mother really was, or I would have thrown the Untoten and Werwölfe at the Dacians instead – or, hell, I'd have asked Weiss and the other aerial mages to fly over the poor bastards and blast them until they turned back. Given how poorly their invasion force had been equipped, that would probably have been enough, and would have avoided *so much* trouble down the line.

"When we last met, I made a mistake," Being X continued. "Several, as a matter of fact. The way I treated you was wrong on my part. You are far from the only human to hold the views you expressed when we talked, and it was wrong of me to punish you for it – not just wrong, it was a breach of my duties. I was … *reminded* of that by my peers, recently. They were the ones who insisted I arrange this meeting in order to apologize, and hopefully put an end to our feud."

The notion that Being X had 'peers' in the first place was interesting. During our last meeting, he had played the part of the omnipotent Creator, the Biblical God from whom all things had sprung. I'd never bought it, of course, and my studies of the Mythos had only deepened my scepticism, but it was still nice to have those suspicions confirmed.

"You brought me here without my consent," I pointed out. "That doesn't sound like the doing of someone who wants to talk peacefully."

"This is your dreamscape. I can affect it, but I can't hurt you, and you can leave at any time. Here, all we can do is communicate."

"There are plenty of ways to hurt someone just by 'communicating' with them," I replied, still not trusting him one iota.

"Then check for yourself," he said, spreading out his arms. "You should be able to do so now."

I reached out with my senses, and flexed my arcane might. To my surprise, he was telling the truth : the bond between us was there, but tenuous. I was confident I could sever it at any time without any ill side-effects.

"Alright," I decided. "I am listening."

"Thank you." He took a deep breath, or at least gave the impression of doing so, then went on : "In addition to apologizing for my previous actions, there are things I need to tell you – secrets of the cosmos that, now that you have ascended to your current position, you must be aware of. To begin with, you should know that I was human once, just as you were. Of course, that was a long, long time ago, and Reality was a very different place back then." He hesitated. "I can show you, if you want."

I considered his offer, then nodded. He snapped his fingers, and our white surroundings changed.

We were floating in the blackness of the cosmos, with stars shining in the distance. And above it all, casting multidimensional shadows over the whole of Creation, THEY were there. I knew at once that this reconstruction Being X was presenting to me was incomplete, a mere echo of THEM, and for good reason, for anything less limited would have risked drawing THEIR attention. Even with my enhanced perceptions, I struggled to comprehend this mere image of THEM, and wondered grimly what it said that Being X was capable of conjuring it – clearly, regardless of my ascension, the bastard was still several rungs above me on the metaphysical ladder.

"There are many names for THEM," he said, the last word resonating with the same power it had in my own thoughts, "each insufficient in its own way. For simplicity's sake, let us call THEM the Sleepers."

Mercifully, the name didn't seem to carry the same weight, which would make this conversation a lot more bearable. He waved his hand, and the image changed, the starlit abyss replaced by the inside of an immense structure that resembled nothing so much as a mix between a cathedral and the inside of some titanic mollusc. Figures moved beneath us, and as I looked, I saw that they were human beings wearing robes covered in eldritch patterns that spread over their skins in tattoos and scar marks.

"In those early days, we were not slaves to the Sleepers. Slavery implies a certain acknowledgment of the slave's personhood, after all. We were a resource, nothing more, to be used and fought over." He paused, gathering his thoughts, then continued : "You have heard, of course, the idea that humans are to the Great Old Ones as ants are to them ?"

I nodded. It was a common enough comparison in Lovecraftian horror.

"Well, while it may fit entities like the Dark Mother, it's completely wrong when it comes to the Sleepers," Being X revealed with all the subtlety of a brick to the face. "If human beings are ants, then the Sleepers are nation-states, each and every one. Powerful, technologically advanced countries, without division or internal strife, all with their own arsenal of weaponry for warfare against their rivals, up to the equivalent of nuclear weapons. By the standards set by your people, I myself am a Class Ten Mythos entity, correct ?"

I nodded, and he continued :

"Then, if we follow the same exponential curve you have set up, the Sleepers would be Class Thirteen entities – the very architects of Reality itself. We do not know what exactly they are or where they came from : all we know is that, in all of the cosmos we are aware of, nothing comes even remotely close to them."

He paused again, an expression on his face I could only describe as haunted, and I wondered what he was seeing as he looked down on the scene spread out below us.

"But there was a saying in your previous world, about insects and nuclear weapons," he continued after a moment. "Do you recall it ?"

I thought I did, and I didn't like the implications.

"… After a nuclear war, the cockroaches shall inherit the Earth," I said at last.

"Precisely," he nodded. "And so it came to pass that the Sleepers went to war with one another, using creatures like the Dark Mother as weapons. There are entire graveyards of such beings in the hidden corners of Reality, lingering in empty space, neither living nor dead, because such concepts don't apply to them. Every universe shook, cracked and burned in the fires of apocalypse. Time and space were undone, remade, and undone again, over and over. My memories of it all are vague at best, as are those of my peers, and we consider it a mercy. What we do know was that eventually, the war ended, and when the Sleepers retreated in the metaphysical equivalent of their underground bunkers to wait out the fallout, we insignificant mortals were left alone in a blasted Reality. Cockroaches in an abandoned nuclear wasteland, desperately trying to survive – and, just like those hypothetical insects, exposure to the fallout of the Sleepers' conflict made us … evolve."

Despite myself, I was listening raptly to Being X's story. I could tell he was speaking the truth thanks to my new senses, albeit a dramatically simplified version, and the part of me that was still a young man devouring the works of a century-dead American author whose mental issues had somehow led him to stumble upon greatness was captivated, just as much as the part of me which had spent years studying the Mythos and keeping others doing the same from accidentally destroying the world in the process.

The old adage that knowledge was power was true, after all.

"Back then, me and my peers were … mages, I suppose is the best word to explain it to you," Being X continued. "Our origins vary, but they don't really matter. What does matter is that we were all, for one reason or another, uniquely placed to witness Reality's unravelling. In the sight of the aftermath of the Sleepers' great war, we found enlightenment. We ascended, found one another, and took up stewardship of the broken cosmos, seeking to bring some semblance of order to the mad chaos that reigned at the time."

"We call ourselves the Pillars. In the Sleepers' absence, we do everything we can to maintain the mechanics of Reality, keeping everything in existence from slipping into oblivion by enforcing what you understand as the laws of physics within the realms under our respective purviews, as well as maintain the cycle of life and death."

"Though I was as close to human as existed during the reign of the Sleepers, not all of my peers were the same. The Sleepers created many different races, some of which completely alien to what you think of as life, yet possessed of souls all the same. As a rule, we try to have each Pillar be responsible for the worlds populated by the species from which they themselves hail. These worlds exist in parallel to one another, many iterations following the same model – which is why the two worlds you lived in were so similar in most respects."

"So," I said after a moment's contemplation. "Reality is a simulation whose developers fucked off after breaking almost everything, leaving a bunch of jumped-up NPCs to manage the servers in their absence – and by that, I mean that they have to keep the devs thinking the simulation is still as worthless as it was when they left, or they will come back and wipe everything out to start over," I summed up.

"That's … huh." Being X's furrowed as he stroke his beard, contemplating my words. "That's not a comparison I've ever heard before, but I guess it fits about as well as the nuclear war one. Except what the Sleepers got up to when they were awake makes any depravity gamers indulge into when they have absolute power and face no consequence for their actions look like the behavior of a saint."

I was slightly surprised he understood the frame of reference I was using well enough to build on it like that, to be honest. I also very determinately didn't try to imagine what horrors the Sleepers had been responsible for.

"You understand, of course, that all of this is a grossly simplified, bare-bones explanation ?" he asked. "You may have grown far beyond your origins, but your mental processes are still anchored into your mortal experience. Maybe in a few hundred years we can talk again and I can give you the details."

"I have worked in Division Y for years," I replied drily. "Yes, I understand."

Occult physics were a field of impossible complexity, that mere humans were never meant to grasp. For all the wonders and horrors Division Y had achieved, the occultists working within it were still blind men grasping at the proverbial elephants and trying to make sense of what they found.

"Good. Now, you know the basics of Reality as we Pillars understand it. Unfortunately, another truth is that there aren't nearly enough of us as we would like, which is why I was so overworked that I behaved … unprofessionally, like you said, when we last met. There are just barely enough of us to keep Reality turning, as well as deal with issues like the Not-Man."

"That's right," I murmured. "Where exactly does it fit in this whole … mess ?"

"Your interpretation of the Not-Man's nature was correct, more or less," he explained. "If we continue with the metaphor of the nuclear wasteland, it is a probe sent out from one of the bunkers to find out whether the ambient radioactivity level has gone down enough for the inhabitants to start sending people back outside. And, in case that wasn't already abundantly clear from context, that is something we *absolutely do not want*."

"But as long as the probes get destroyed and never report back to their masters, the Sleepers will continue thinking Reality is unsuitable for them to return," I finished, following the explanation to its logical conclusion. "And the reason why the Not-Man was comparatively weaker than the Dark Mother is the same reason that, say, the Mars Rover isn't as combat capable as a combat drone."

"Precisely," Being X nodded. "Though the Dark Mother wasn't designed for combat either, but that's not relevant right now. The Not-Man is but one of the Sleepers' contingencies, but we Pillars have managed to keep them all from realizing the truth. However, all it would take was one failure, one slip-up, and one of the Sleeper would awaken – and once one of them is back in action, the rest will follow suit soon enough. At that point, it would all be over : even one of the Sleepers would be too much for us Pillars to handle. Several of us have spent aeons researching the matter in the hope of finding *something* which would let us fight them

on somewhat equal terms, but while they discovered several avenues of action, none of them have ever been tested, for obvious reasons."

That was surprisingly professional of them.

"Very well," I decided. "I understand, more or less, and I accept your apology for what you did to me personally. I can only imagine the stress of being subjected to that kind of work without pause for untold millennia, so you snapping at me is, if not excusable, then understandable. But there's a lot I still don't get."

"Ask away," he said. "At this point, we believe that full disclosure and complete honesty are the best course of action."

"First, when we last met, you were angered by my lack of faith in the divine – that was the whole reason for this whole mess in the first place. Why ? Nothing you've revealed so far indicates that you need human worship. Is that all for your personal ego ?"

Alright, maybe I hadn't quite forgiven him yet, but in my defense, I had a lot more reasons to be pissed off at him beyond reincarnating me.

"No, no," he immediately replied, waving his hands around as if to dismiss the very idea. "That's because, as I told you, we Pillars are hideously overworked, even with our influence restrained to a small proportion of the cosmos. As a result, we all endeavour to bring other souls to enlightenment, so that they can join us in our work."

"Is that possible ?" I asked, one eyebrow raised. "I mean, I know that's rich coming from me, but I can't help but think what I went through must be some pretty exceptional circumstances."

"It is," he confirmed, "although it is extremely rare, and we still have very little idea how it works. Nevertheless, several souls have joined us after finding enlightenment over the ages. Most of them did it through religion and faith, which is why I seek to promote them wherever possible. I don't need people to worship me, or anything else in particular, but I do want them to have *some kind* of spirituality, and in your previous life, you were, well …" He trailed off hesitantly.

"A materialistic, rational, cold-hearted bastard," I finished for him. "Yes, I am aware. I don't think that your approach is going to work, though. You can't *force* people into reaching enlightenment, and in my experience, religion tends more to suppress intellectual pursuits rather than encourage them."

"That's a debate neither of us is well-placed to solve," he replied, sighing deeply. "We are both too involved to be objective. All I will say is that if you find a better way, then *please*, share it with us. What else do you want to know ?"

"I want us to talk about what else you did," I accused him. "You were the one who taught the Francois to create the Eikons, weren't you ?"

"Yes," he nodded. "After what happened to the Dacians, I believed you had joined forces with the Not-Man in order to get back at me. I didn't think you were fully aware of what you had allied yourself with, but that didn't matter : the threat to this world was too great to take chances. That's why I empowered the mages of the Francois Republic when I realized their attack on Arene was going to bring them into your presence. Their mission was to capture you in order to extract information about the location of the Not-Man from you so that it could be stopped."

"You 'empowered' them ?" I repeated in disbelieving tone. "You brainwashed them, you mean. Turned them into complete maniacs, fanatics without any regard for collateral damage !"

"That wasn't my intent," he protested. "I sought to stress the importance of their mission while giving them the power they would need to face you and your creations. Unfortunately, due to the mindset they held at the time of anointment, their psyches were … warped, as the thoughts in their heads were amplified beyond reason."

"And you didn't know this would happen ?" I asked, making no attempt to hide how unlikely I found that possibility.

"Oh, I knew something like it would happen," he replied easily, taking me by surprise. "It wasn't the first time I empowered my faithful in order to battle the minions of the Not-Man, as you know. The effects of direct contact between me and them were well known to me, even if the details vary with each iteration due to cultural differences. But, again, I believed it to be necessary to avoid a far greater disaster."

"You stripped people of their free will," I said, aghast. "How does that align with your stated goal of bringing souls to enlightenment ?"

"Necessary and acceptable sacrifices. The souls affected by the process would be cleansed of this influence after death, and get another chance in their next reincarnation. Besides, none of those who were turned were particularly likely to reach it in this life anyway – well, except Schugel, maybe."

"Schugel ?" I snarled the mad scientist's name. "Him ?! Enlightened ?!"

"I understand you don't like him," Being X tried to placate me, "but he was genuinely brilliant, if a bit unhinged even before I made contact with him. His research into mana manifestation led him to places few other souls of this world ventured. That's why I made the effort of reaching out to illuminate him, even though he was well behind the lines of the Not-Man's shrouding influence."

I took a deep breath, or at least forced my mental projection through the memory of it. I had to remember that, even contrite, Being X was very, very bad at being social, which I assumed was the result of aeons spent running the machinery of life and death with very little social interaction.

"Unfortunately, what I did to him ruined his chances of reaching enlightenment in this life," he sighed. "Illumination granted directly by me or another Pillar is a very different thing from

genuine enlightenment, and it completely destroys any possibility of achieving the actual thing."

"What exactly does 'illumination' mean in this context ?" I asked.

"Divine revelation," he replied. "It involves a Pillar showing the backstage of Reality to a mortal soul, so to speak, granting them insight into the hidden mechanisms of the universe. Unfortunately, the process is hardly perfect, and only a rare few individuals can even hope to survive without being utterly broken by the experience. I tried with Teslus, for instance, and while he did glimpse far more of Reality's underpinnings than I expected, my instructions for him went completely unheard."

I blinked. Was that because, in the man's own words, he had been blackout drunk at the time ? The notion that alcohol could shield someone's mind from divine revelation was one I hardly desired to contemplate.

Then another thought occurred to me.

"Based on when the Unified States started to work on their superweapons program, Schugel was still alive and in Remula when you tried to 'illuminate' Teslus," I began. "Had you already given up on Schugel and the Congregation back then ?"

"No, but remember that I have thwarted iterations of the Not-Man for aeons. I know the value of backup solutions, and pulling the Unified States into the Great War seemed like the course of action with the most chances of success – but only if they had the means of fighting your Wunderwaffen on semi-equal grounds. And before you ask, the Congregation was a remnant of previous iterations, maintained over the centuries so I wouldn't have to start from scratch if another version showed up in the same area later," he explained.

"We are going to get back to this in a moment," I promised him. "Before that, though, shouldn't the fact Division Y fought the Heresiarch and the other monsters of the Nameless City have clued you in that we weren't working with the Not-Man ?"

"Should it ?" he asked me back. "From my perspective, it could have been a bluff, a method of increasing your influence. Besides, I knew each iteration of the Not-Man didn't know anything about its predecessors' actions, and I knew the Albish were the ones to remove the artefact and open the gate instead of studying it like I wanted them to."

That was a tad paranoid, but then, Being X had played this game he alone knew how many times, and the instance of the Not-Man I was acquainted with had subverted the entire Imperial Court without anyone but Being X noticing, so I was forced to (reluctantly) give him the point here. Not that it would help him much, because now that this question had been addressed, I felt ready to tackle the one that had been on my mind since punching him.

"I see, I see," I said, nodding, before letting the anger I felt show on my face and all but hissing my next words : "And what about Kory ?"

"Kory ?" he asked, brows furrowed in incomprehension. If possible, the sight only made me angrier.

"Yes," I said. "Kory. The girl whose memories, whose very name you took, in the process of turning her into a Saint so she could wield that accursed artefact Schugel made for her, to burn a path through the Alps and enslave an entire city full of innocent people. *That* Kory."

His eyes widened as he realized who I was talking about.

"Ah, her. I, huh … I didn't … I didn't choose her," he said. "That was all the Congregation. I guided Schugel in building the triple-core computation orb once he came up with the idea himself, and provided him with the knowledge he needed to adjust the Eikons in order to make them more effective, but I had nothing to do with the Congregation's selection of the orb's wielder."

"Maybe so, but you didn't stop them," I immediately countered. "Don't pretend you couldn't have told them to only use adults if you wanted to. By your own admission, Division Y's wards and the Not-Man's influence only blocked you from direct interference in the Empire."

"… Yes, I could have. But it wasn't the first time something like this happened. However reprehensible you might find them, when it comes to preventing the Not-Man from fulfilling its purpose and awakening the Sleepers, the sacrifice of a single child is well worth it –"

"Careful," I cut him off, forcing my voice to remain calm – and, judging by how he suddenly gulped and took a step back, not quite succeeding. "Or I am going to punch you again."

He shut up.

"Do you know her name ?" I went on, still fuming. "The one she forgot, because your divine light burned it out from her mind along with almost everything else ?"

"I … I don't," he admitted with obvious reluctance. "You must understand that, though I look like this to you," he gestured at his bearded self, "I am no longer human, and haven't been for a very, very long time."

"That sounds like an excuse to me," I accused.

"Is it ?" Being X asked softly, and there was a weight to his words that hadn't been here before, as if he were letting me see behind the mask he'd assumed during our entire discussion. "I have presided over the cycle of reincarnation in the worlds under my care for untold thousands of years, remember. What you see as tragedy is merely the turning of the wheel to me. It wasn't always so, but please think of it from my perspective. If I wasn't detached, if I wasn't apathetic to the deaths of the billions of souls which go through my system, I would go completely mad with grief and horror."

I pondered his words for a moment. I was familiar with the need to silence one's empathy in order to do what needed to be done – that had been one of the key requirements of my job in my old world, although it had been easier for me than it would have been for most other people, I had later come to realize.

And running the afterlife would require even more emotional detachment. I didn't know how much of the process was automated, but Being X had clearly been aware of my own final

thoughts in my previous life. If he knew the last thoughts of every single human being in the worlds under his purview, then yes, he would absolutely need to stop considering each individual life as precious, or he would have gone mad long ago – and, having experienced a taste of what a Pillar with a petty grudge was capable of, that would have been a disaster on par with the Dark Mother's manifestation.

It wasn't an excuse, because nothing could excuse stripping children of their free will and turning them into weapons. But it was an explanation, and that was the best I was likely to get.

"Why is there a need for a reincarnation cycle in the first place ?" I asked out loud, both to buy myself more time to think and calm down, and because I was genuinely curious. "If you want more people to reach enlightenment, wouldn't longer memories be a good way to achieve that ?"

Sure, I had no idea how it would work biologically speaking – I knew from experience that being a child with an adult's memories was a living nightmare – but those were the current overseers of Reality we were talking about. They could have found a workaround, maybe with people growing in pods instead of inside other people.

"All souls in Reality date from the time of the Sleepers," he replied. "They were the ones to create them as part of the process of making their slave-races, and that is a secret none of us have uncovered. From our perspective, a soul is eternal, but we know the Sleepers could create and destroy them at will – or, rather, as part of their own ineffable processes. Without a soul, there is no spark of self-awareness, no true consciousness as you understand it."

I listened, knowing that I was hearing the kind of secrets religions went to war over.

"Before the War of the Sleepers, there was no reincarnation to speak of : souls were merely resurrected over and over again, born anew in shapes that suited the needs of their owner. But after the war, we Pillars built up the reincarnation system across the worlds we managed to restore, and added the wiping of memory because … well, because by that point, every single soul in existence had been driven mad by the horrors of the war," he finished darkly. "Those which weren't already insane beforehand, at least."

"What do you mean ?" I asked, knowing I wouldn't like the answer.

"The creatures you call Fiends were a lot more widespread back then," he replied, immediately confirming my presentiment. "They had their own civilizations, their own worlds, and those were as depraved and monstrous as you can imagine. The worst thing about them, though, is that to this day, we do not know whether the Fiends were created by altering mortal stock … or the opposite. Even we Pillars remember little of the bad old days, which is probably for the best. But to answer your initial question, the longer a soul is 'active' without going through the memory-scrubbing phase of the reincarnation process, the more of these ancient memories it starts to remember, until they either go insane again or, worse, become a Mythos cultist and start trying to awaken the Sleepers. Without reaching enlightenment first, remembering the Time Before is just that dangerous. And we have tried to completely erase these memories, but they are too deeply ingrained in every soul in

existence : all we can do is keep them from resurfacing through regular 'scrubbings', so to speak."

The idea that humans as a whole were the degenerate descendants of entire races of cannibalistic horrors created to serve as slaves and footsoldiers of the Old Ones was a disturbing one, to say the least. I pondered it for a moment, before another realization prompted me to ask another question.

"What about the Werwölfe ?" I asked. "Every one of them who encountered the Fiends described a feeling of deep-seated hatred for them. Where do *they* come from ?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The symbionts with which they bond came from the Void, which is what we call the damaged sections of Reality which exist beyond the Pillars' ability to maintain and monitor, and there is much about the Time Before we don't remember. My best guess is that they were designed as countermeasures against the Fiends by a rival Sleeper, and you were lucky enough to tame them. Humanity can be infectious in its own way, as you know."

Yes, I did. I wasn't blind to how my second life had changed me, even before the Kosmosblut had started me on the path to ascension. Whether it was because of a different brain chemistry or due to the people I had been surrounded with, I had stopped being the cold-hearted, clear-minded rationalist I had considered myself in my past life.

"And the Nazzadi ?" I asked. "If you Pillars are responsible for maintaining Reality, what happened to their world ?"

"When the War of the Sleepers ended, countless worlds fell into the Void : we were only able to maintain a tiny fraction of all those created by the Sleepers," he began. "We don't even know how many of them still linger on outside of the section our influence stabilizes. Nazza-Duhni was, is one of these worlds, which fell into chaotic anarchy when the War ended, and one of the leftover weapons stumbled upon it. Because the proper flow of Time is one of the laws we enforce, there were still survivors for you to find there, but it was sheer blind luck that your portal opened a gateway there instead of literally anywhere else in the endless void – or, if not blind luck, then the result of eldritch physics we don't have time to get into right now."

I shivered at the notion. I remembered that there were philosophers in my old world who had claimed that Hell was the absence of God : it seemed that they had been more correct than they knew, if the ruined landscape and broken skies of Nazza-Duhni were what awaited any world deprived of the Pillars' stabilizing influence. Of course, Being X was still very different from the image of the Abrahamic God these philosophers had believed in.

"Both Nazza-Duhni and my current world have magic, but my previous one didn't," I said. "Why is that ? Why do certain worlds have mana and others do not – or did my previous world have it, and nobody realized, or if they did, it was all a secret ?"

The notion of a whole society of magic users having existed on my previous world while remaining concealed from the rest of the public might sound exciting to teenagers, but as an adult, I doubted it was possible, especially in the modern era.

"No, your previous world was devoid of magic entirely," Being X confirmed. "Mana is dangerous, because it gives people who use it the potential of awakening the Sleepers, however remote. That's why it doesn't exist in most worlds, like your old one : we Pillars don't think it's worth the risk."

"Then why does it exist here ?" I asked.

"Because this particular world is closer to the Sleepers, metaphysically speaking. That's also why the instances of the Not-Man manifest there and not elsewhere : it is closest to the vault door, so to speak."

"And you reincarnated me *here*," I deadpanned. "Right when another instance of the Not-Man was about due to pop up, since one comes up every thousand years or so."

"It wasn't my proudest moment, as I've already said," he replied sheepishly. "At the time, all I could think of was to give you a life as different from your previous one as possible."

By bringing me into a world full of irrationality, all in the name of some stupid experiment to see if I could be made to have faith. The most galling part of it all was that, strictly technically speaking, it had worked : I certainly believed in the existence of greater powers now – hell, I was one of them, according to the Path of Stars.

Which reminded me.

"And what about me ? What have I become, exactly ?"

He shrugged. "Something new. You haven't reached enlightenment quite yet, but you are on your way there, and the power you wield is above and beyond anything a human untouched by the Mythos can wield. In some ways, you are similar to the Not-Man's Chosen – I think you call them Ancients ? – but with more personal power and without the binding compelling you to obey its orders. My peers are very interested to see how you 'grow up', so to speak. The possibility that the Kosmosblut might just be a way to 'force' enlightenment is one that has our attention, you can be sure of it."

"I'm not going to experiment with the serum on other people," I told him bluntly.

"Of course not. But if you do end up joining us one day, it will be something to keep in mind."

"… Fine. What of the sky that shows up whenever I use my full Lady of Stars form ? What's with the stars and the moon ?"

"That is because your presence is reshaping reality around you, enforcing your own set of laws in much the same way we Pillars enforce our on the worlds under our care. It is similar to the effect your presence has on mortals – which, by the way, isn't quite indoctrination. Rather, your metaphysical weight is so great, it affects the minds of those who interact with you, even if only by looking at you from a distance."

"Affects them *how* exactly ?" I asked, worried I might need to isolate myself to keep from violating the Berun Protocols.

"It makes them consider things from your point of view, brings them in closer alignment to your own values. At your level, however, I do not believe the effect to be permanent, but even a brief moment of contemplation can be enough to change a mortal's perspective."

Good. I was still going to need to test this to confirm it, as I doubted that the other signatories of the Protocols would be happy with me telling them to take my word for it, but that was still a relief.

"Okay, I think that's all my questions answered for now," I said. "So let's get to the most important point. You have brought me here, apologized to me, and explained everything I asked about. What are you hoping to get from this ?"

"Peace," Being X immediately answered. "With the Not-Man removed from play, I can watch the Empire freely once again. I am aware of the conference's goals, and while I would prefer all memory of the Mythos be erased as happened with previous iterations, I'm painfully aware that it isn't feasible this time, not without enacting another Flood."

"Another ?" I repeated.

"This isn't the first time such a close call with the Not-Man or another Sleeper contingency occurs," Being X shrugged, entirely without guilt. "And preventing the Sleepers' return is well worth the lives of every human on one planet, though the trauma this leaves on their souls is hard to remove even for me. Even to this day, long after that particular world was purged, the psychic trauma lingers : where do you think the stories of the Flood come from ? Let me tell you, it took a lot of work to incorporate them into existing theologies so that people wouldn't try to figure out where the imagery really comes from."

Again, I was reminded that while Being X might appear as a human, and was certainly as flawed as any of them, he wasn't. In fact, he had told me as much mere moments ago.

"If you had the option, the risk of the Not-Man succeeding was so great, and you clearly don't care about the loss of human life, then why didn't you send a Flood right away ?"

"I *do* care about human life," he corrected me. "If for no other reason that the more worlds there exist with sapient, ensouled life on them, the stronger Reality itself is against the contamination of the Void. It makes the job of us Pillars easier, as well as create more opportunities for souls to reach enlightenment and join us. So I was going to hold back until the very last moment, hoping it wouldn't be necessary – and, in the end, it wasn't. I was aware of the conference and could guess the Not-Man's intentions for it : if you had emerged from the Imperial Palace ennobled by the Kaiser and ready to represent him at the table, I would have enacted my own contingencies."

We had come very, very close to the apocalypse, then.

"To get back to the main point," he continued, "Pandora's box has been opened now, and it cannot be shut. In previous iterations, this was possible, but the modern world is much more

connected, and information travels too fast. Hiding the truth of the Mythos' existence is no longer possible, and you are aware of the dangers this represents."

I nodded. That was the whole reason behind the security rules of Division Y, and now the Berun Protocols. From the moment the Denkmaschine had been turned on and had started producing usable spells, I had realized how dangerous they could be, and Being X's revelations on the nature of the cosmos only made that more important.

"What I want is for you to do what you claimed to already be planning to do with the Berun Accords : prevent the proliferation of the Mythos, and avoid the destruction of the world," said Being X. "My agents on this world have been crippled, and while I can recruit more, that would inevitably put us into conflict with one another, which the Sleepers might take advantage of. So I need you to do what you said you were going to do, with the additional knowledge of what is really at stake. Should you need assistance, I shall be willing to assist you."

He stopped talking, letting me consider his proposal. Much as it galled me, there was only one possible answer. I was, after all, a rational being, even if I was no longer human. Only recently, I had sat with the leaders of the world and told them to put aside their differences in order to protect Mankind from the Mythos : could I do anything less now ? My grudge with Being X paled into insignificance compared to the ruination creatures such as the Dark Mother and the Not-Man threatened, let alone the cosmic apocalypse he had just revealed could occur if the Sleepers realized the universe had started recovering from their war.

"I don't forgive you for what you did to Kory and the other people you hurt," I told him at last. "But I accept that the Sleepers are far worse than you could ever be. In this situation, there is more to gain by cooperating with you. I won't hunt your followers down unless they break the Protocols, and focus on keeping the Mythos from destroying the world and then the universe. Do you have any recommendation on what we should do ?"

"Several, all of which I think you're already aware of," he replied, looking very relieved that I wasn't going to punch him again. "The remaining Chosen of the Not-Man are the greatest active threat at the moment. Each of them were the champion of a previous iteration of the Not-Man, granted immortality along with considerable power to lead its forces against the rest of the world. Now that the Heresiarch has been destroyed, the Fox, the Hierophant and the Grandmother are the last three left : the Fox in the Far East, the Hierophant in Southern America, and the Grandmother in Russy."

"They are also the most dangerous," I pointed out. It only made sense : Being X's own agents would have purged all the weaker ones over the ages, leaving only the ones truly difficult to kill.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "The Grandmother especially. I have been trying to kill her for thousands of years, but even when my agents controlled the entire region, she managed to slip between their fingers again and again. Unlike some of the others, she's never been imprisoned or forced into slumber : she has been active in one way or another for longer than any other living creature on that entire world."

"How long, exactly ?" I asked.

He told me, and I recoiled. That was … that was a hell of a long time to be alive. She hadn't seemed crazy during our brief conversation, and from what Zhenkov had told me, she had also appeared rational to him and the other Russy officers who had interacted with her – terrifying, yes, but sane.

She was definitely going to be a challenge for the League of Nations, that was for sure. Unless we were lucky and she decided to fade back into myth with the Not-Man's latest iteration foiled, but I wasn't willing to bet anything important on that possibility.

"In terms of raw power, the Fox is a bit beneath the Grandmother, but above the Hierophant. There's a reason the ancient exorcists of Qin and Akitsushima were only able to seal her away instead of killing her. The Hierophant escaped destruction in much the same way as the Heresiarch : you'll need to find the entrance to the dimensional pocket where he withdrew after the destruction of his iteration of the Not-Man."

"Do you know where that entrance is located ?" I asked. Any concrete intelligence would make the upcoming operation a lot easier, as I wasn't looking forward to combing the world's largest jungle while under constant attack by the Ancient's minions.

He nodded, and projected a map of the area with the location highlighted. I looked at it for several minutes, memorizing every detail I could. Explaining where I'd gotten the intel would be complicated, but I was sure I could figure something out that didn't involve outright lying to our allies.

"You will also need to keep an eye on the Denkmaschine," Being X continued after dismissing the projection. "I don't *think* there is anything to fear from it until the next iteration of the Not-Man comes around, but it remains something it had a direct hand into creating, and it might have left hidden contingencies inside it."

"How likely is that ?" I asked, my mind already spinning as I tried to imagine what form such contingencies might take.

"Honestly ?" Being X shrugged, and I reflected that the casualness of the gesture was entirely at odds with his solemn and dignified appearance. "Not much. In my experience, the Not-Men aren't very good at planning past their own defeat, mostly because they don't expect it to happen even if they learn of their previous iterations' existence and failure. It's a clear flaw in their design, but one we should all be thankful the Sleepers have no opportunity to correct. Still, better safe than sorry."

Which might as well be the motto of Division Y, as well as whatever the new global organization tasked with enforcing the Protocols would end up being called.

"So, clean up the situations in Akitsushima and Brazil, keep an eye on the Denkmaschine, and look out for signs of the Grandmother's activities in Russy," I summed up. "And if I fail ?"

"Then I shall have to enact another Flood after all," he said grimly. "Because, regardless of the loss of life and damage to Reality that will ensue, it is still better than allow the Sleepers to return."

"I won't let it come to that," I promised.

"I hope you do," Being X replied. "In time, maybe you will join us in the Heavens. Until then, I wish you good luck, Tanya von Degurechaff. Farewell."

"Farewell," I said, and severed the connection between us.

Chapter End Notes

AN : Happy New Year, everyone !

It is one thing to realize that your reality is a computer simulation. It is another to realize that the source code was written by Bethesda, and the modders who are keeping the whole thing running live in terror of the day the studio realizes their existence and sends them a DMCA takedown.

I'm not really satisfied with the flow of this chapter, which is due to me writing whole sections of it separately as ideas came to me and then needing to stitch them together into something resembling a proper conversation. Oh well, neither Tanya nor Being X are 'normal' people, so I guess it makes sense them talking wouldn't flow like a dialogue between two normal people would. See ? It's not laziness or poor writing, it's a stylistic choice !

If there are some elements of the worldbuilding revealed in this chapter that don't make sense to you, blame Being X. He is the one telling the explanation, after all. And if you really don't like the worldbuilding, feel free to dismiss it entirely, apart from the bit with Being X and Tanya coming to a tentative ceasefire. I don't expect it to be that important to the next and final chapter of this fic, which will be a prolonged epilogue stretching out over several decades to show the aftermath of the Great War, the creation of the League of Nation and the Mythos Containment Agency (name still pending, so if you have suggestions you haven't posted yet, now is the time).

As always, I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter, and I'll see you soon (hopefully) for the next and final installement of A Young Girl's Weaponization of the Mythos.

Zahariel out.

# Chapter 44 - Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*"It is done.*

*Even now, having seen it with my own eyes, I can scarcely believe it. I had already witnessed the confrontation in the skies of Berun between the Lady of Stars and the Pretender; I had felt the power she possessed, blazing from her like a radiant star.*

*But the Fox has haunted my family for generations. My ancestors were part of the coalition which sealed her centuries ago, and we kept the memory of her atrocities alive ever since, all to ensure that our vigilance would not falter.*

*As the one of my siblings who possessed the greatest mana potential, I was marked as his primary heir and successor. While the customs of Akitsushima generally favor male heirs, the Onmyōji have always operated differently, for raw power is more important to fulfilling our sacred duties than mere gender.*

*From the moment I was old enough to understand what our duty to the Dominion was, the shadow of the Fox has loomed over me. For even though she had never escaped in all the years between her sealing and the Solstice Event, we knew from our forebears' warnings that her imprisonment was far from absolute. I was taught of the atrocities she committed in Qin and the rest of our neighbours, before she crossed the sea and waged a one-abomination war against the entire Dominion.*

*And now, she is dead. Not just sealed away once more, but well and truly dead, never to return.*

*With the help of the agents from the old Division Y, now affiliated to the newly founded Mythos Suppression Authority, we were able to locate and corner her in yet another village she'd turned into her playground. I could see how this hurt my father's pride, for the Onmyōji have spent months hunting her down, only to remain several steps behind her at every turn – yet Division Y's occultists managed to locate her in a few days.*

*Pride, however, means nothing compared to duty, and this was precisely what my father was hoping for when he sent me to Berun to ask for assistance.*

*Although I stayed several kilometers from the action, my optic spells let me watch what happened as clearly as if I had been right there. The Lady of Stars led the assault, plunging down from the skies as the tip of our spear, from high enough that the Fox wasn't able to detect their presence until too late.*

*The Fox shed her beautiful guise then, revealing her true, bestial self. She looked like her namesake, though much larger, and made up of dark, crackling energy. It and the Lady of Stars clashed, the violence of their battle forcing the aerial mages to distance themselves.*

*Their battle laid waste to the entire village, and those thralls which weren't dragged to safety by the mages (against their will in every case, as they all fought to remain close to their mistress even if it meant certain death) surviving.*

*The battle lasted for nearly an entire hour, and laid waste to much of the surrounding countryside before the Lady of Stars cut off the Fox's head with her moonlight blade. The remains were immediately secured by the Authority, incinerated in mage fire, and the ashes placed within a heavily warded coffin for transport back to the Empire, where they will be studied and eventually sealed away in the Black Vaults – a facility built by Division Y and now made available to the Authority.*

*Truth be told, with what I know Division Y used in the Great War and what I witnessed with my own eyes in the skies of Berun, I shudder to imagine what horrors might already be lurking in the Black Vaults, and what else will be locked away there in the years and decades to come.*

*It is a great relief to know that the Fox is dead, but there is still much to be done. Her thralls must be rounded up, and the damage she caused during her rampage across Akitsushima must be repaired. The image of Imperial perfection on which so much of our social order rests has been badly shaken, since we were forced to rely upon the intervention of foreigners to defeat the demon plaguing our land.*

*It is my personal belief, and my father's as well, that joining the new League of Nations is the best path forward to prevent further chaos. Not only will the Berun Protocols and the Mythos Suppression Authority hopefully stop such a disaster from happening again, but the Dominion becoming part of the international scene in such a manner should turn the people's minds away from our failures to protect them ..."*

From the personal writings of Sakura Adashino, diplomatic envoy of the Akitsushiman Dominion to the League of Nations, November 12th, 1926.

---

*"Operation Wermut began on December 18th, 1926, at 4:00 AM, local time.*

*Units from the Brazilian and Unified States Armies converged on the AO, which covered several hundred square kilometers of forested area. Approximately forty thousand mundane soldiers were deployed alongside units from Research Group 51 and Division Y, with Director Serebryakov overseeing things alongside the American generals from the command center. Communication lines were maintained using both technological and magical means, with each unit having at least a pair of combat mages assigned to it.*

*At 4:27 AM, the first contact with the enemy was reported : a mix of human cultists suborned to the Hierophant's will and monsters (later categorized as Class Three and Four Mythos entities). Thanks to the preparations of the coalition forces, casualties remained acceptable, and the armed forces were able to link up at the pre-planned locations, encircling the target.*

*With the cordon solidly in place, at 7:38 AM, Regentrix von Degurechaff led a team of twenty aerial mages through the spatial gate leading to the dimensional pocket where the Hierophant had been hiding since the defeat of a previous iteration of the Usurper by a*

*coalition of the local powers of the era. There, they engaged the Hierophant, along with a number of Fiends it had created from the individuals drawn to him in the months since the Solstice Event.*

*For more details on what was found on the other side of the gate, please consult the individual interviews conducted on the members of the team post-operation, which are in this report's annexes. The honor of dealing the final blow to the Hierophant went to Aerial Mage Zerayah.*

*With the demise of the Hierophant, the dimensional pocket began to crumble. Regentrix von Degurechaff had to exert her power to keep it from collapsing before her team could escape. Communications were re-established with the kill-team at 8:17 AM, as soon as they left the dimensional pocket.*

*As happened with the Fox, the death of the Hierophant didn't free those it had enslaved, even if they were still human. Those who were taken alive were remanded into the custody of the MSA, who will work to break their indoctrination with the Regentrix's own assistance.*

*At 10:30 PM, Operation Wermut was officially declared a success. The Brazilian Emperor thanked the Mythos Suppression Authority for its help, and made a public declaration of his intent to have his country join the League of Nations as a signatory member. In addition, Aerial Mage Zerayah has been offered the Medal of Merit, the highest honorific which the Brazilian Empire can bestow upon a foreigner.*

*At time of writing, the site of the collapsed portal has been confirmed by experts to be harmless, and has been opened to archaeologists under the supervision of the Brazilian government ..."*

Extract from the internal MSA report on Operation Wermut, filed on January 17th, 1927.

---

*NEW YEAR DAWNS ON NEW ERA*

*With the Great War over and the League of Nations celebrating its first two successes in the Far East and South America, it truly seems that a page of History has been turned.*

*Though the Empire has suffered much in the last few years, from the long rolls of the honored dead having fallen in the Great War to the loss of the Imperial Family, we can look toward the future with our feet firmly planted on the ground, more resolute than ever to overcome what challenges may come.*

*Regentrix Tanya von Degurechaff has already proven her valor twice again since assuming the throne – not that she needed to do so, having led Division Y through the many challenges of the Great War – with the great victories won in the Far East and Southern America.*

*The League of Nations stands as the herald of a new world order, one illuminated by the lights of new, arcane sciences, while the people of the world are bound together in the lessons learned in the fires of the Great War ...*

From the headlines of the *Berun Post*, January 1st, 1927.

---

*ARKHAM INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OPENS*

*Yesterday, our President formally opened the new Arkham International University, during a ceremony attended by representatives from numerous nations, along with the President and Professor Nikol Teslus of the secretive Research Group 51.*

*Since its founding in the early years of our great nation, back when we were still an Albish colony, the city of Arkham has been the unofficial center of magical research in the USA, although our country's relative youth meant that we were ever chasing the trails left by our cousins in the Old World. As Research Group 51 advanced our understanding of arcane principles by leaps and bonds under the leadership of Professor Teslus, the city was selected as the training ground for the Professor's assistants, taught secrets of the universe which very few minds can comprehend, let alone make use of.*

*Now, however, the new International University whose construction was recently completed will serve an even grander purpose, as it will train the next generation of occult scientists : the best minds of all member nations of the League will be sent here, to study the inner workings of the T-Engine and other Mythos secrets shared by the members of the League under the Berun Protocols.*

*To ensure that the Protocols are strictly adhered to (the legacies of the Ildoan Crusade and Solstice Event being grim reminders of the consequences of skimping on safety where the Mythos is considered), the Mythos Suppression Authority has built a branch within Arkham. This branch will be tasked with monitoring the University's lesson plans and experimentation program, with full permission to intervene and forbid any action which might endanger the surrounding town.*

*In his speech, the President proclaimed his hope that the University will, in time, become one of the cornerstones for an era of peace and cooperation between nations ...*

Excerpt from the front pages of the Unified States newspaper *The Philadelphia Gazette*, April 5th, 1928.

---

*"Three years after the Solstice Event and the fall of Moskva, the dread legacy of the Dark Mother has finally been contained to the satisfaction of the Mythos Suppression Authority.*

*The dome of concrete which was built over the Blast Site immediately following Operation Gottesmörder has been replaced and reinforced using magecraft, and the ten layers of arcane seals have been applied. The mana detection arrays around the site no longer detect any leakage through the dome, and the final examination of Being K's corpse before its sealing showed no trace of self-resurrection.*

*Per standard procedure, the occultists who performed the final checks were quarantined upon exiting the Blast Site and subjected to all the standard tests for Mythos influence. All of*

*them came through clean, confirming that the Dark Mother is as dead as it is possible for an entity of that power to be.*

*The number of recorded encounters with surviving Progeny has dwindled in the last three years, thanks to the constant vigilance of the international task force charged with monitoring the region under the League of Nations' aegis, as well as the ongoing efforts by the government of Boragrad (formerly Josefgrad) under Premier Zhenkov to continue hunting the remains of the Dark Mother's horde.*

*The Okhotniki have continued to operate since the death of Being K. As per the League of Nations' charter, their treatment continues to be monitored by the Authority, both to ensure their well-being and to make sure the various governments which have appeared in Russy since the Solstice Event do not attempt to hide any further developments about them."*

From the MSA report on the completion of the containment facilities surrounding the Moskva Blast Site, September 18th, 1929.

---

*FIRST T-ENGINE POWER PLANT ONLINE ON THE EAST COAST*

*Today was a momentous occasion, as the first power plant using the principles of the famous T-Engine, which powered the enhanced forces deployed against the Dark Mother in Russy, went online, with such worthies as the President and the Regentrix of the Reich, Tanya von Degurechaff herself, in attendance.*

*The Teslus Power Plant is expected to provide enough electricity for the entire East Coast for the next ten years, at which point the forecast growth of the relevant areas will outgrow its capabilities.*

*With the prototype a success, plans are already being drawn to build more such facilities, not just here in the Unified States, but in every member country of the League of Nations.*

*The only stain on what would otherwise have been a perfect opening was a small demonstration of opponents to the station's existence, believed to be in the pocket of the American oil industry, which (quite rightly) sees the T-Engine as a threat to their revenue …*

Excerpt from the front pages of the Unified States newspaper *The Philadelphia Gazette*, August 17th, 1930.

---

*"To Johann-Mattaüs Weiss,*

*Warren Grantz, son of Mister Philipp Grantz and Mrs Dora Grantz, and Mary Sue, daughter of Mister Anson Sue and Mrs Andromeda Sue,*

*Request the honor of you and your wife's presence at their wedding,*

*On the seventeenth of May, in this the year of our Lord Nineteen Thirty-One.*

*The wedding shall take place within the church of Sarvin, and shall be followed by a celebration within the courtyard of Castle Schwartzstein, with dinner and dancing in the manners of the Empire and the Entente."*

Wedding invitation received by Captain Johann-Mattaüs Weiss, March 2nd, 1931.

---

*EMU WAR ENDS IN DECISIVE VICTORY*

*After thirty-eight days of brutal fighting, the forces of the League of Nations have finally triumphed over the bestial foe which emerged from our country's wilderness to threaten us all. Teams of soldiers in sealed suits are even now walking the battlefield with flamethrowers, incinerating the corpses of the feathered monsters.*

*In his press conference, the Prime Minister thanked the Mythos Suppression Authority for its invaluable assistance, and announced the establishment of a national day of mourning for those lost to the flightless horrors. The MSA is still investigating the source of the avian scourge which cost so many lives before being wiped out ...*

Excerpt from the headlines of *The Glimmer*, New Holland newspaper, December 11th, 1932.

---

*August 4th, 1934 – Castle Schwartzstein Grounds*

Günther stood in silence to Evelyn, the rest of their siblings forming a circle around their eldest sister, as a quartet of Imperial mages solemnly carried Gehrman's coffin toward their Maker's final resting place.

A lot of people from Division Y were here, including Director Serebryakov (it still felt weird to think of her with that title) and the Regentrix herself. Gehrman had been one of the oldest members of Division Y, even if his contributions to the Empire had only really taken off once Director Degurechaff had taken over – but then, he was hardly alone in that. Everyone in the Division had met him at some point, even if only in passing through the corridors of Castle Schwartzstein.

Now, they all stood here, paying homage to the brilliant if troubled mind behind Projekt P and the numerous prosthetic advancements which were even now being used by thousands of veterans of the Great War who had lost one or more limbs in battle – be they Imperial, Francois, or Legadonian.

Gehrman had lived long enough to see every Puppe become capable of speech, bridging the distance between Mythos entity and human being. It had taken time, and the road had been a difficult one, but enough experience of the world had proven enough to help each of the old Professor's creations awaken to full sapience.

In the end, he had passed away in his sleep, with Evelyn at his side. There had been nothing anyone could do : he had merely died of old age, his body no longer capable of keeping him alive, and the more arcane methods Division Y might have employed would have requested informed consent he was no longer able to give.

His final words, before falling asleep for the last time, had been to thank Evelyn for taking care of him, call her his beloved daughter, and wish her good fortune in her life from now on – proving that, at the very least, some part of him had always known the truth of his creations.

It had been as good a death as could be expected, which had come at the end of a long and fruitful life, one marred by great tragedies, but which Gehrman had raised above even as they left him scarred forever. Günther knew this. And yet, he couldn't stop himself from trembling, could not block the pain his chest, or the tears running down his orichalcum cheeks.

When the ceremony was over and only the Puppen were left standing before Gehrman's grave, Günther collapsed to his knees, and wailed and wept, soon joined by his siblings as they hugged each other and mourned for their lost father.

---

*FRIGHTFUL TALE OF HORROR, BRAVERY AND DERRING-DO BY FAMED AUTHOR CAUSES RELIGIOUS FRENZY !*

*Henry Patrick Lovegrave's latest book,* The Call of Michael*, has hit the shelves this last Monday, to much outcry from the religious community, who consider the book (which take place during a dramatized retelling of the events which led to the destruction of the Holy See) to be blasphemy of the highest order – a denunciation which, it must be said, has likely done more to increase the sales of the novel than anything Mister Lovegrave himself could possibly have done.*

*Regular readers of this publication will be well acquainted with Mister Lovegrave's name, as the man has long been a figure of contention in the Unified States for his outrageous views on social mixity and civil rights – which reached their apex with his marriage to a woman descended from Southern Continent stock five years ago, a union that still isn't recognized in several States, leading to a number of tense occurrences when the author toured them to promote his books and the causes he supports. Throughout his writing career, the author has never been shy of using his works to promote his own beliefs, having heroes of all color and creed work together against the unrighteous, and the events of the Great War and the revelation of the Mythos have only made him bolder and more outspoken.*

*During the writing of* The Call of Michael*, Mister Lovegrave journeyed all the way to Europa to interview eyewitnesses to the Battle of Remula, and went so far as to apply with the Mythos Suppression Authority to be authorized to ask questions of the formerly indoctrinated population of Bovariastadt in order to best describe the unearthly effects of the Mythos on the minds of his characters.*

*While some may consider this distasteful, Mister Lovegrave himself insists that with all the wild speculation going around about the Mythos, not making its dangers very clear, even in a work of fiction such as his own, would be the height of irresponsibility. Asked about this, sources within the MSA have congratulated Mister Lovegrave for the depth of his research, though one of us also asked our journalist to 'remind him that access to the site itself is still forbidden to everyone not part of the Authority and on an investigation mission'.*

*Rumors that Mister Lovegrave may have somehow obtained an interview with General Lergen himself, or even the Regentrix, are as of yet unconfirmed, however ...*

From the Unified States newspaper *The National Truth*, September 2nd, 1938.

---

*ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS CONTINUE ACROSS COUNTRY*

*For the third consecutive weeks, cities across Albion have been disturbed by a number of anti-imperialistic protests, demanding significant changes in the policies of the Allied Kingdom.*

*The protesters appear to belong to the so-called 'Path of Stars', a movement born during the Great War as a result of civilians and soldiers alike growing disillusioned by the actions of their governments. Pre-eminent among their demands is that Parliament abolishes a number of laws that have been in effect for over a century, and replace them with new ones meant to 'protect the common people, rather than the pockets of the elite'.*

*The Path of Stars had previously made itself known with its support for the independence of the Albish colonies in the early 30s, which was part of the agreement by which the Allied Kingdom was authorized to join the League of Nations at the Berun Conference ...*

Excerpt from the front page of the *Londinium Times*, May 17th, 1940.

---

*"We've found her. She is somewhere near the Tunguska river.*

*Come here as soon as possible. We don't have the assets to take care of this ourselves."*

Top-secret message sent by Premier Zhenkov to Regentrix Tanya von Degurechaff, May 10th, 1942.

---

*May 22nd, 1942 – Russy – Near the Tunguska River*

From the outside, the house looked completely ordinary to the mundane eye. A small hut of wood and stone, with a roof made of dried hay – an almost painfully stereotypical fairy tale house. In a modern country, it would have looked painfully out of place, but here in Russy, the only thing surprising about it was its location, so far from any other sign of civilization.

But I knew better. I could see the layers of wards surrounding the building, keyed to its sole inhabitant. The first set were designed to keep people from approaching – after that, they got more aggressive, up to the three towers of bright shadow and dark fire which had been summoned from the Void to keep watch over the place.

It was quite the feat of spellcraft, and confirmed the intel I'd been given before this deployment. There were very few mages on the planet who could build something like this, and most of them worked for me.

I walked toward the house alone. The towers snarled and growled like guard dogs at the approach of an intruder, but didn't attack – whether out of fear or because they had been ordered not to by the house's owner, I didn't know for sure.

I knocked on the door. There was no need to be impolite, after all.

"Come in," said a voice I hadn't heard in nearly sixteen years.

I opened the door and stepped inside something straight out of a fairy tale. A bunch of wooden furniture was spread across a single room that occupied the entire space, built solidly but without frivolities. A fire was roaring in the fireplace, and shelves were full of a variety of boxes and other containers of wood, glass, and pottery.

Looking at the room through my other senses, I could see that there was a lot more to this place than met the eyes : entire sections of a vast lair were hidden away in folded corners of space, in an intricate display of staggering arcane complexity, that made the hidden strongholds of the Heresiarch and the Hierophant look like a child's attempt at drawing compared to a master's painting.

But, however fascinating such things were from an academic perspective, they weren't why I had come. For there, sitting on a rocking chair with a steaming cup in her gnarled hands, was the woman I had come to meet.

"Hello, Grandmother," I greeted the last Ancient left on the planet.

"Hello, child," she replied. "Would you like some tea ?"

Not quite the welcome I had expected, but again, there was no need to be impolite, and maybe I could even glean some valuable information before things inevitably escalated to their inevitable conclusion.

"Yes, please."

She gestured to the chair opposite her, and I sat down. It was, to my complete lack of surprise, perfectly suited for someone of my height. A cup of tea appeared on the table in front of me in the time it took me to blink, the small cantrip using just enough mana to register to my more arcane senses.

I picked up the cup and took a tentative sip, running every antidote spell I knew (which was a considerable amount). I didn't really expect the Grandmother to resort to something as base as poison, not at this late hour, but it wouldn't do to be careless.

In any event, the tea wasn't poisoned, and tasted really, really good. For several minutes, the two of us simply sat here, drinking and looking at one another.

"You killed him, then," she said eventually. She didn't sound angry, nor sad. Just … resigned.

"I did," I replied, not needing to ask who she was talking about. "In Berun, years ago. He tried to enslave me, and I refused to let that happen."

"Hmm." She took another sip. "He will come back, you know."

"Another version of him will, yes," I agreed. I didn't know whether the Grandmother was aware of the fact each instance of the Not-Man had nothing to do with the previous one, but felt revealing that fact to her would be a mistake. "In a thousand years. I intend to be here, or, barring that, for what I have built to be there to stand against him. He won't succeed again next time, or time after, or the time after that."

We still didn't know whether or not I was really immortal – or as immortal as the Ancients themselves, as I had no doubt I could be killed if someone put in the necessary effort. The thought of living that long, of seeing everything I knew change and disappear as the sands of Time eroded it away, frightened me more than a little, but I took comfort in the thought that I would still have companions like Visha throughout the long years.

"So, you have aligned yourself with the Adversary then ?" the Grandmother asked, her voice showing the first sign of anger in our conversation as she spoke the name used by the Not-Man's servants for Being X.

"No," I answered. "I don't serve him, and I never will. But he and I agree that the goals of your master are abhorrent. Do you know what his victory would actually mean ?"

I was curious about that. Being X had told me that long-lived souls eventually started remembering the Time Before, and the Grandmother had certainly lived long enough for that to become a possibility. But if she did, then why would she help him orchestrate the Solstice Event, all to bring about the Berun Conference and, more importantly, sealing my power so the Not-Man would have the opportunity to bind me to his service ?

"Of course I know, dear," she said, sounding like a teacher chiding a student who was only now catching on to something they'd been trying to make them understand for the entire lesson. "He wants to bring the Old Ones back. The ones who ruled before the Adversary and his ilk took over."

"And you are fine with that ?" I asked, not quite managing to hide the disbelief I felt.

"My own opinion on the matter is irrelevant, child. When he made me what I am, I swore to follow him and obey his commands for the rest of my life. And so I have, and so I shall."

She was being perfectly sincere, I realized. To her, keeping her word to the Not-Man was more important than anything else. I understood then that the aeons of her existence had warped her mind much like what had happened to Being X, until what was left could pass for a particularly eccentric human, but operated under completely different values.

"For what it's worth, I am thankful for your help in Moskva, even if it had hidden motives," I said. "And I am sorry it must come to this."

"Don't worry about it, dear. Now, shall we begin ?"

I put down my teacup. She did the same. For one, long moment, we stared each other down across the table.

Then I shifted forms, as did she, and we went down to the business of trying to kill one another.

---

*"At 2:40 PM local time, the mana detection arrays deployed around the exclusion zone registered a sudden spike in mana, immediately followed by the sight and sound of an explosion of inordinate size. Analysis of the records indicate that the detonation was of a strength similar to the explosion of fifteen megatons of TNT, and if not for the vastness of the exclusion zone on which the Regentrix had insisted beforehand, the entire task force could easily have been lost. As it was, the mages deployed along with the recording equipment had to activate their shields to prevent casualties.*

*Seven minutes after the detonation, the Regentrix made contact with the team on the ground, informing them of her survival and the mission's tentative success. The explosion was attributed to the collapse of the many spells used by the Grandmother to protect her lair, which were destroyed during the confrontation. Thankfully, the Regentrix was able to avoid the brunt of the explosion by hiding with the dimensional manifold even as it collapsed, her personal shields strong enough to withstand the portion of the detonation's strength which leaked through the dimensional barriers.*

*Although the survival of the Grandmother is considered unlikely, in the absence of a body, the Regentrix decreed that the Authority will remain vigilant for any sign of her influence in the Russy region. This promises to be a difficult task, as it is possible the Ancient went to ground and intends to remain in hiding for decades if not centuries. If nothing else, it will provide us cause to act in the former territories of the Russy Federation, which are still in chaos from the Solstice Event's fallout.*

*One additional peace of good news is that the Okhotniki haven't shown any reaction to the presumed demise of the Grandmother, even those whose containment sigils were carved by the Ancient herself ..."*

Extract of the MSA report on the Tunguska Event, filed on June 1st, 1942.

---

*"Following the end of the Great War and Bovariastadt's evacuation and rebuilding as one great center of research into the Mythos, the Tear has remained stable, neither expanding nor decreasing in size. By now, we are confident that the Tear is merely a visual effect and not a portal leading to some alien location, as aerial mages who flew through it eventually appeared above it – though the crossing in itself is a disquieting experience (see attached interviews for more details).*

*Since then, the MSA has continued its monitoring of the city's former residents across the Empire, to ensure there are no long-term effects from their exposure to the Eikons' indoctrination and then the Tear itself. While they show the signs of trauma one would expect from what they were subjected to, no physical effects were observed, and the star-marked haven't shown any additional symptoms since their initial ones.*

*The children born around the time of the Tear's opening have now reached adulthood, and show no difference with those born at the same time elsewhere in the Empire of any statistical*

*significance. Many of them, however, have faced a degree of discrimination from their peers – not so much hostility as a certain level of reverence due to their link, however tenuous, to the Regentrix."*

Extract from the MSA monitoring report on the Tear of Bovariastadt, filed on January 10th, 1944.

---

SOCIAL UNREST IN MAGNA RUMELI

*Like other countries whose economy relies heavily on the export of oil, Magna Rumeli's fortunes have taken a downturn in recent years, with the use of T-Engine power stations becoming widespread across the globe. As the lower classes have begun to protest what they see as the mismanagement of their country's economy by their rulers, tensions have begun to increase as the authorities resort to violent means to maintain order ...*

From the headlines of the *Berun Post*, February 12th, 1946.

---

*"The Deathless Cabal was, prior to its annihilation by the MSA, quite possibly the greatest threat to the world since the end of the Great War, and the greatest challenge yet faced by the Authority. It is only now, with the benefit of hindsight and the work of hundreds of investigators, that a clear picture of what exactly happened has become visible.*

*The Cabal was first founded by a group of wealthy men who, having learned of the Untoten's existence, believed that the secret to immortality could be found in the Mythos. After their attempts to obtain the spell formula used to create the Untoten failed, they used their wealth to finance a number of expeditions and occult research programs, concealing their actions from the Authority using the same underhanded methods most of them used to obtain or maintain their fortunes.*

*In 1932, one of these illegal digging sites, located in the Southern Continent, uncovered a series of four stone tablets covered in an unknown language. Over the next three years, the Cabal poured considerable resources into translating the tablets, eventually succeeding through the use of a large number of computation orbs linked together in a primitive but working imitation of the Denkmaschine, built by arcane engineers paid a small fortune for their work and silence.*

*The translation of the tablets revealed something called the Rite of the Unnamable, which the Deathless Cabal believed would grant immortality to those who performed it. With the lack of forethought typical of individuals who have spent their lives using their privilege to get whatever they wanted, the wealthiest (and oldest) members of the Deathless Cabal immediately began preparations to perform the Rite.*

*In 1936, five members of the Deathless Cabal performed the Rite of the Unnamable – which is one of the rare instances of Mythos spellcraft that can be performed without the caster possessing any innate mana, something which, to quote Director Serebryakov, 'would have raised alarms in any group with even a modicum of good sense'. The Rite appeared to be a*

*complete success, and the members of the Deathless Cabal believed they had achieved immortality, albeit in an altered state.*

*Yet this was only an illusion, as those who performed the Rite instead essentially committed suicide, bringing into being a Class Five Mythos entity in return. These entities, classified as the Trostlose, or 'Desolate Ones' for our Albish-speaking colleagues, are extremely cunning and vicious, and seek only to bring more of their kin into existence as well as spread misery across the world.*

*Interrogation of captured specimens has revealed that, unlike the Fiends, the Desolate Ones do not believe themselves to be the cultists who performed the Rite, merely in another form : apart from the need to deceive others into performing the Rite themselves, they consider themselves wholly separate beings, innately superior to Humanity, which they regard as servants at best and playthings at worse. They do not have memories from before their summoning, but possess an instinctual knowledge of their own nature and have access to all the memories of their creator, allowing them to play the part with ease.*

*Visually, the Desolate Ones appear identical to the mage who performed the Rite which created them, apart from their eyes, which are transformed into two black spheres – easily disguised by a simple illusion spell, or even a mundane pair of tinted glasses. Any physical disability or weakness from old age of the original caster doesn't affect them, though visual markers are still present, and they can fake them with the same ease they pretend to be the people they replaced. Crucially, if they age, no sign of it was ever identified on the specimens the Authority examined – indeed, the prevalent theory is that the Desolate Ones are incapable of increasing in power from the moment they first manifest, as the most recently transformed cultists weren't any less powerful than the first ones.*

*In addition, the Desolate Ones are capable of performing advanced magic, using Elder sorcery spells akin to those created by the Denkmaschine, without the need for a computation orb. With those abilities, the first Desolate Ones proceeded to incite the rest of the Cabal to perform the Rite themselves.*

*Within a year, over four score of the world's wealthiest men (and a small handful of women) were turned into deathless abominations. Those few who had doubts about the true effects of the Rite were quietly eliminated by the Trostlose.*

*It was one of these assassinations that first brought the Cabal to the attention of the Mythos Suppression Authority. The victim was a relative of one of Division Y's researchers, who felt something was off about the death and tipped the MSA off. The ensuing investigation quickly uncovered traces of foul play in the victim's demise, although at the time it was believed to be nothing more than an act of passion, or perhaps jealousy.*

*But the Desolate One which had performed the murder panicked, believing the Authority had already uncovered its existence when agents came to interview him. It reacted violently, killing two agents before being eliminated by the third, its remains immediately brought in for examination.*

*The fact the Desolate One had been able to pass as human for several months prior to its discovery triggered the first Masquerade Scenario since the foundation of the Mythos*

*Suppression Authority. Investigations swiftly uncovered the existence of more Desolate Ones, and eventually that of the Deathless Cabal itself. Upon learning of this potent threat to Humanity, Regentrix von Degurechaff immediately declared a state of emergency across the board, mobilizing all of the MSA's investigative assets.*

*Thus did Operation Gravewarden, the second largest operations ever performed by the MSA (surpassed in scale only by Operation Gottesmörder), begin. The threads of the Deathless Cabal were followed across the world, with every bit of the MSA's influence being brought to bear. The human members of the Cabal were arrested, both to be judged for their violations of the Berun Protocols but also to prevent the creation of more Trostlose. The true nature of the Rite of the Unnamable was publicly revealed in the hope of preventing others from going through with the ritual, but we know of several cultists who still attempted it, apparently convinced that the Authority's claims were lies to maintain some imagined monopoly on immortality.*

*Within a few months, the financial might of the Deathless Cabal was broken, thanks to the rapid mobilization of numerous government agencies who cooperated with the MSA in what was later described as an exemplary application of the Berun Protocols. Several Desolate Ones sought to escape in countries which aren't members of the League of Nations. Due to the exceptional threat they pose to Mankind, special dispensation was issued by the Security Council in a sealed session for the Authority's agents to strike regardless of potential diplomatic consequences, in black operations which, as far as we have been able to ascertain, have yet to be traced back to us.*

*The final stage of Operation Gravewarden took the form of an assault on a Deathless Cabal's hidden facility within the deserts of the Southern Continent, close to the location where the steles were first discovered. Military forces from the League of Nations were mobilized in order to deal with the mercenaries the Deathless Cabal had recruited, as well as the lesser, mindless Mythos entities they had summoned. The Kingdom of Kemet sent the most soldiers, with an entire division's worth of troops being mobilized and transported across the Southern Continent in time for the assault, which was spearheaded by Director Serebryakov herself. Due to the possibility of the Desolate Ones calling in a higher-ranking Mythos entity, Regentrix von Degurechaff was kept in reserve, but that threat ultimately failed to materialize.*

*During the following engagement, Director Serebryakov personally fought and destroyed half a dozen Desolate Ones, and reclaimed the stone tablets containing the Rite of the Unnamable. In order to be able to combat the Desolate Ones effectively should they ever return, these tablets have since been sequestered in the Black Vaults of Castle Schwartzstein. All other copies are to be destroyed immediately, lest someone else foolish or desperate enough enact it and give some of the vilest aspects of the Mythos a foothold on our world.*

*In the final debriefing of Operation Gravewarden, Regentrix von Degurechaff mentioned that the lure of immortality is a potent one, and that the MSA must remain ever vigilant for others succumbing to it at the expense of all reason and sense ..."*

Extracts from the MSA report on the Deathless Cabal, filed on August 7th, 1952.

---

*ACTION, HORROR AND ROMANCE : THE MYTHOS ON THE SILVER SCREEN*

*The long awaited movie adaptation of the American pulp author Henry Patrick Lovegrave,* The Shadow over Europa*, has hit the cinemas across the country this week, and its popularity is undeniable, with ticket sales during its opening week-end surpassing anything before.*

*Rather than focusing on one specific book by the American author, the film's director chose to draw upon the entire recent corpus of Mister Lovegrave to weave together one single coherent story spanning the entirety of the Great War. This was done in cooperation with Mister Lovegrave.*

*It is undeniable that no effort was spared in making this movie as close to life as possible. In addition to hiring numerous civilian mages to help with the special effects and the action scenes, the filming crew obtained the rights to film some of the film's scenes in the catacombs underneath Parisee, where the agents of Division Y confronted one of the Eikons which had survived the Battle of the Rhine.*

*Albish Archaeology Professor Henry Carnahan assisted the film crew during the parts of the production which took part in Kemet, bringing both his expertise in the history of Ancient Kemet and his personal experience of the Mythos – as he was part of the ill-fated Albish expedition which uncovered the Nameless City and caused the Fiendish invasion which nearly laid waste to Kheriaha. In an interview to the* Londinium Times*, Professor Carnahan said that while he was reluctant to return to Kemet given what happened during his last visit, his mind was changed by Mister Lovegrave, who asked his help in ensuring that the Kemetian culture was properly represented in the movie.*

*Several aerial mages from the former Imperial Army were also consulted on the action scenes, which are, in this reporter's modest opinion, the best ever put to film – a challenge that I'm certain our own film-makers won't let go unanswered …*

From the Francois newspaper *La Véritée*, December 12th, 1958.

---

*"On the 16th of October, 1962, a group of fourteen mages performed a summoning on the island nation of Cuba. Later investigation revealed that these mages had ideological links to the fallen Russy Federation, and blamed the founding nations of the League for its collapse. Based on the writings recovered in their residences, it appears they sought to avenge the fallen Federation by unleashing the same kind of calamity which laid it low upon the Unified States.*

*Unfortunately, we will never be able to know for sure whether their beliefs were influenced by the Mythos or the result of 'natural' radicalisation, as the mages were immediately devoured by the nine Class Six Mythos entities, categorized 'Shoggoths', which they successfully brought into existence with their ritual. It is our current hypothesis that the summoners succeeded in giving orders to the Shoggoths, but ordered them to cross the sea and attack the Unified States before telling the monsters not to attack them.*

*The Shoggoths were similar in nature to the Mythos entities used in the creation of the Puppen, but without an orichalcum chassis or the arcane principles which allow them to*

*empathize with Humanity and cross the boundary between Mythos and Man. While they exhibited signs of intelligence such as tool use and cooperation, they made no attempt at communication – or, at least, none which could be understood – and their behavior couldn't be interpreted as anything but hostile.*

*After crossing the ocean and making landfall in the continental Unified States, the Shoggoths laid waste to a local settlement, killing a total of three hundred and forty-nine people in just a few hours. The terrified survivors called for help, but the local police force was woefully ill-equipped to deal with such a threat. Eventually, as the Shoggoths began moving north following the road to the next settlement, they were intercepted and destroyed by the Unified States Army's Fifth Augmented Battalion, deployed from their base by direct order of the President.*

*Based on recovered materials at the summoning site and within the occultists' residence, it appears that the concept behind the ritual came from some of the Arkham Documents they managed to get their hands on ..."*

Extract from the MSA report on the Cuban Shoggoth Crisis, filed on December 1st, 1962.

---

*"November 12th, 1926 : Operation Fuchsjagd. Defeat of the Ancient codenamed 'Fox' in the Akitsushiman Dominion.*

*[...]*

*December 18th, 1926 : Operation Wermut. Defeat of the Ancient codenamed 'Hierophant' in the Brazilian Empire.*

*[...]*

*June 6th, 1928 : birth of the first child of an Okhotnik father. While signs of the child's parentage are immediately obvious, and more reveal themselves over his growth, he appears free of the Dark Mother's influence.*

*[...]*

*November 2nd, 1932 : the Emu War begins in New Holland. After thirty-eight days of brutal fighting and the deployment of a MSA task force to support the divisions of the New Holland Army, the beasts are stopped a mere hundred kilometers from the capital.*

*[...]*

*September 26th, 1938 : Sakura Adashino, leader of the Akitsushiman Onmyōji and Regentrix Tanya von Degurechaff sign the Treaty of the Lotus, by which the Onmyōji are formally recognized as a branch of the MSA.*

*[...]*

*October 7th, 1940 : the Arkham Burglary Scandal. Through a combination of bribery, intimidation and blackmail, a group of criminals manage to enter the library wing of the*

*Arkham University and escape with over thirty different grimoires containing arcane knowledge related to the Mythos. Though the culprits are caught and incarcerated within a few weeks of the break-in, fragments of the so-called Arkham Documents continue to re-emerge to this day in the hands of illegal occultists. The University President resigns in apology for this egregious failure, and security around the campus is increased even further.*

*[...]*

*May 22nd, 1942 : the Tunguska Incident.*

*[...]*

*August 21st, 1945 : the Demonsgate Breach. During an attempt to recreate Division Y's Projekt Silberschlüssel in a research base affiliated with Research Group 51 and located in a deserted area, the occultists accidentally open a gateway to another plane of existence inhabited by hostile Mythos entities. The entire facility is lost, but thanks to its isolation and the swift deployment of a brigade of Marines followed by the USA's enhanced troops in an operation overseen by the MSA, the incursion is successfully contained and the Breach sealed.*

*[...]*

*November 1st, 1948 : the Akkazar Conjunction. During a solar eclipse, the Akkazar Comet passes before the eclipsed sun. Occultists and astronomers across the world claim to have received visions of unspeakable horrors and immense engines of flesh and metal while observing the astronomical event. The MSA investigation discovers no sign of indoctrination, though several of the affected occultists need time in psychiatric care in order to recover.*

*[...]*

*October 1949 : the Hollow King is summoned by its cult in Lantao, indoctrinating thousands of the island's denizens before being confronted and eliminated by the MSA's Asian branch. De-programming activities last for several months before the influence of the entity is declared eradicated from the area, and entire sections of the island remain off-limits to the public due to lingering Mythos effects that have yet to be sufficiently understood to be dispelled.*

*[...]*

*February 17th, 1951 : Operation Gravewarden begins after the existence of the Desolate Ones is discovered during the investigation of an Imperial businessman's death under suspicious circumstances.*

*[...]*

*December 5th, 1952 : Operation Gravewarden ends, with the Deathless Cabal declared annihilated at the Battle of the Lonely Sands. Rumors of wealthy individuals refusing to accept the MSA's description of the Rite of the Unnamable's actual effects and seeking to obtain it for themselves start to circulate almost immediately : whether there is anything to*

*these rumors beyond the distrust of the working class for the wealthy elite remains undetermined.*

*[...]*

*March 5th, 1953 : at the order of ageing Premier Zhenkov, a hundred Okhotniki (a full third of the ones who survived Operation Gottesmörder) and those of their children who chose a career in the military are permanently assigned to the Mythos Suppression Authority. In exchange, several members of the League of Nations renew their commitment to humanitarian support to the former territories of the Russy Federation, as well as their political support to the Premier's efforts to rally the fractured territories to the New Russy Republic, centered around its capital of Boragrad (formerly Josefgrad).*

*[...]*

*May 24th, 1958 : after over a decade of delay following the Demonsgate Breach, opening of the Silver Portal Network, with the first permanent portal being established between the Europan and American command centers of the MSA. Access to the portals, and those built since, is reserved to official League of Nations business due to the costs and security precautions inherent with their operation, but their existence still allows the MSA to deploy its operatives in response to threats across the world with incredible speed.*

*[...]*

*July 5th, 1959 : the cult of the Grasping Ones is eradicated after attempting a coup in the Ispagna Collective. The Class Seven Mythos entity summoned by the cultists is eliminated by Regentrix von Degurechaff herself. Despite attempts to capture the cultists alive for interrogation and deprogramming, they fight to the last. The total death toll is estimated at approximately five thousand.*

*[...]*

*October 16th, 1962 : the Cuban Shoggoth Crisis."*

Fragments from the notes of a student at the Military Academy of Berun, in preparation for the portion of the History exam regarding the Mythos Suppression Authority.

---

*July 16th, 1969 – Germania Capital Berun – Space Center of the League of Nations*

On the main screen of the large control room in which over two hundred engineers and support personel worked and watched with baited breath, the display from the helmet camera of Captain Timana was being displayed, showing the bridge of the *Pixie XII* as her crew ran through the final checks before her maiden voyage. Due to the sheer inconceivable distances involved, there should have been a delay of a few seconds, but some clever application of the sorcerous mechanisms behind Projekt S bypassed this restriction completely.

What was to happen this day would be an incredible step forward for Humanity, of this there was no question. In mere moments, the *Pixie XII* would activate its warp drive, which would

bring her crew to the very edge of the solar system, allowing them to deploy observation satellite around the system's outermost planetoid. And eventually, the arcane principles behind its warp drive would deliver Mankind to other stars entirely, bringing the entire genre of speculative fiction that had grown in the last two decades into reality.

The walls of the observation room in which President Eric von Lergen stood were decorated by pictures of the previous Pixies, each of which had brought Mankind further along in its journey toward the stars. From *Pixie I*, which had carried the first crew of aerial mages to orbit and confirmed that magic could still be used outside the planet's gravity well, to *Pixie XI*, which had carried Mankind to another world for the first time in History, delivering her crew to the Red Planet after a journey of several months.

One of these photographs in particular caught Lergen's eye. It showed the crew of *Pixie VII* standing together on the moon, wearing bulky spacesuits protecting them from the rigors of the void. By some stroke of luck, the light from the planet visible in the shot's background had fallen upon them at just the right angle that their faces were visible through their helmets, most of them smiling like children who have just had their every dream come true.

That day, too, had been momentous. The entire world, it seemed, had watched or listened to the reports of *Pixie VII* approaching the moon before landing and disembarking her crew – the very first human beings to step foot on a star other than the one their species had been born on … if you didn't take the Nazzadi and Division Y's accident with Projekt S into account.

Out of the entire line-up, Captain Timana jumped out for obvious reasons. Like all children born of the union of a Nazzadi and a native of Earth, his skin was silver, his features a mix of his parents in an ethereally beautiful way. Most amlani, as they were called by their Nazzadi forebears, possessed strong innate magical power – though scientists were still divided on whether this was due to the interracial union bringing out the best from both parents, or simply because the survivors of Nazza-Duhni were all already powerful through simple natural selection, and most had found partners within Division Y and the Imperial Army who were mages themselves.

Regardless of the reason for his magical prowess, Timana had proven himself as capable as his mother, the famed aerial mage Zerayah. Life as an astronaut might be less violent than an aerial mage's, but it was no less dangerous or demanding. On the few occasions Lergen had met the man, he had somewhat reminded him of Degurechaff, back when she had been a cadet at the Imperial Academy – except with less apparent blood thirst, which Lergen now realized was probably due to her difficult upbringing.

Lergen had been invited to bear witness to the proceedings, an invitation he'd gladly accepted. Of all the historical events he had witnessed, painfully few had been so optimistic as this, and he could always use more good memories. It was also a rare opportunity to go somewhere people didn't pause and gawk at his presence, due to working on something far more important than him.

Since the publication of Helena Schmidt's book over a decade ago, Lergen's already inflated reputation had grown to ridiculous levels, and his every attempt to make people understand that while yes, he'd been on the ground during several of the most important events of the

century, the actually impressive stuff had been done by a bunch of other people while he tried to stay alive and do his duty, was only taken as more evidence of his modesty.

Which was how, when the Reich had gone from being an Empire to the Republic of Germania, he had received the dubious honor of being elected its first President. With Zettour and Rudersdorf having passed away from natural causes years before, Lergen was the last one left of the supposed backers of Division Y in the old Imperial Army, and many had considered him the natural fit for the job – a position with which the public had agreed. The position was mostly ceremonial, but it did come with a number of duties Lergen had done his best to discharge.

No doubt the nobility would have protested the changes to the country's constitution more heavily, Lergen reflected, had the destruction of the Imperial Court not resulted in a number of titles passing to members of Division Y, who had followed their ex-Director's lead with enthusiasm. As such, the transition from Empire to Republic had been about as smooth as such things could be, with things having changed very little from the perspective of the average citizen.

These days, Degurechaff was wholly focused on her job as head of the Mythos Suppression Authority. The agency had grown considerably since its not-so-humble beginnings in 1926, now covering a veritable network of global operatives tasked with protecting the sanctity of Humanity's dominion over the world – or, depending on who you asked, maintaining the League of Nations' iron grip on the planet.

And, speak of the devil – or, given how popular the philosophy of the Path of Stars still was these days, speak of the goddess – here she was, walking into the observation chamber with the same confidence she always exuded.

In her human form, Tanya von Degurechaff looked exactly like she had at the Berun Conference all these years ago. Time had left her untouched, something Lergen, who was well into his seventies by this point and starting to feel the weight of his years, was faintly envious of. Like him, she was dressed to the nines, though her own clothes looked more professional and practical than his own – another thing which he faintly envied her, as it had been years since he'd had any control over his own wardrobe. At least his wife took his own tastes into account, unlike his aides, who were only concerned with 'maintaining the dignity of the office and its holder both', whatever that was supposed to mean. In his old age, Lergen had found that had a lot less patience for protocol than in his youth.

"Regentrix," he nodded in greeting.

Technically, Degurechaff no longer held any official position in the Republic of Germania, but only a fool would believe that to be actually the case. The MSA's influence was greater than that of most of the nations to which it theoretically answered under the League of Nations' charter, and as its undisputed leader, the Regentrix (who still had the right to use the title as a result of some obscure bit of legalese in the document which had officiated the transition from Empire to Republic) was one of the most powerful people on the planet. Unless you counted personal power, of course, in which case she was the most powerful one without any question.

"President," she returned his greeting with a smile that, these days, looked warmer than threatening. "It's a pleasure to see you, as always."

She sat down next to him, and the two of them watched the organized chaos of the room underneath them in silence for a moment. Timana's small crew had finished running the final checks on *Pixie XII* : either everything was fine, or things were so catastrophically wrong it had escaped the notice of six of the most well-trained mages in the history of the world.

A countdown began, ticking down to the activation of the warp drive. On the screen, Timana placed his hand around the lever which would trigger a device whose workings only a handful of people understood (even after four decades of operation, Arkham had yet to figure out a way to teach the secrets of the T-Engine to the common academic : it really seemed that an innate spark of genius was required to grasp the occult physics Professor Teslus had uncovered). The Captain's hand didn't tremble, Lergen noted, the clarity of the image making that obvious.

Impressive. God knew, Lergen himself had needed to hide his nerves many times in his long career, and he could read Timana's body language well enough to know the man was as nervous as the President had ever been.

"Tell me," Lergen asked. "Do you have any insight on whether or not we will find someone else out there ?"

The existence of the Nazzadi and the Mythos had caused many to speculate about the existence of alien life – though the existence of the amlani had pretty decisively proven that the Nazzadi were just another Human ethnicity, if an especially exotic one. But Lergen's clearance was high enough that he knew at least some of Division Y's supersoldiers had no common ancestor whatsoever with Mankind.

Degurechaff shook her head. "I know that there is life beyond our world, but not whether that life can be reached through simple bending of space. I have reasons to be optimistic that any life we do find in the great beyond will be, if not friendly, then at the very least not inherently hostile to our existence as some of the Mythos entities are. Still, it is better to be sure, which is why I made sure *Pixie XII*'s crew were prepared for combat as part of their astronaut training."

Well, that was only mildly terrifying, which was the best result Lergen could really have expected. He shook his head, smiling, and returned his focus on the screen, where the countdown was nearing its end.

*"Three ... two ... one ... Ignition !"*

Chapter End Notes

AN : And here we are at the end. Does the maiden journey of the Pixie XIII go without a hitch, or does she disappear along with her entire crew a la Event Horizon ? Does the

tearing of spacetime cause some manner of large-scale calamity ? And if the vessel arrives to Not!Pluto, what do her crew find hidden there ? Some strange race of fungi-based creatures, dwelling in tunnels beneath the planetoid's forzen surface ? Or a forgotten weapon from the War of the Sleepers, left to drift across space for countless aeons ?

Such questions are no longer for me to answer - and the same is true on whether or not the Grandmother survived the Tunguska Incident, whether any Desolate Ones still lurk in the shadows, spreading the Rite of the Unnamable to the foolish and desperate, or what exactly happened in Not!Australia to cause the Emu War. This story is at an end, and if you want to write your own stories in the setting I have created, then by all means, feel free. This story has already ended up much, much longer than initially planned.

Yes, Henry Patrick Lovegrave is Not!HP Lovecraft, except basically an inversion of the man in every way that matters - including the fact that his life is much, much happier than the poor bastard of our own timeline. Seriously, look up Lovecraft's biography, it's almost comically awful.

And yes, the Mythos Suppression Authority is quite the boring, bureaucratic name. That was on purpose. I tried to find a meaningful acronym, but didn't manage it, so I fell back on something suitable for government work.

It has been a pleasure to write this story and to read all your thoughts, comments and reactions to it. Thank you all for your support, and I hope you enjoyed this journey along with me. I don't have plans to start a new story right now : there are several ongoing chapters that I want to finish first. One of my New Year's resolution is that any new story I do start writing this year will be much shorter than anything I've previously written - that is, I must have a concrete plan for the story, with a limited number of chapters and content to put in them.

Will the Muse cooperate ? We shall see. She remains, after all, the most capricious and dangerous Mythos entity of all, one that even Tanya herself could not bind, compel, or banish.

Zahariel out.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!